The Address

Nirupama Bargohain

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n the suitcase bought by Ramen there was hanging a blank card for writing the name and address. On it Jatin Mazumdar carefully wrote in nice, intact letters 'Jatin Mazumdar, Gandhibasti, Guwahati–3, Assam.' Of course he wrote in English: while outside Assam, who would understand the sweet Assamese alphabets? Of course the Bengali would, but they'd spell his name wrongly – yes, the 'r' of Mazumdar would be spelt as 'b'. Still he remembered, many days ago, while he had been standing beside a long-distance bus waiting to catch another, a young boy of around 10-12 years, from a Bengali family, had painstakingly pronounced the words written on the body of the bus, 'Assam Chabkabab Motob Charvichh' instead of 'Assam Sarkarar Motor Service' – and then almost fell to the ground with laughter. It seemed they had been new to Assam, but even then Mazumdar's face had turned red with rage – as if he would slap the boy's face! You would come to our state, feed yourself, stay, get permanently settled here, snatch the jobs from our boys – but would never learn our language; would live here for generations after generations: but let alone the Assamese 'Dainik Assam', wouldn't even touch the English 'Assam Tribune', but read only your 'own' newspapers published from Calcutta, say 'Anandabazar' or 'Jugantar' – unbearable!

Still, though the Bengali people won't recognise 'r' or 'v', they'd naturally recognise the other alphabets. But once you cross the border of West Bengal, your Assamese language would be like Latin or Greek to the other Indians. So there's no way but to write the address in English. However, while in Assam he always used Assamese. In his notebooks his address was in Assamese, on his books and periodicals it was in Assamese, the addresses written on his letters to his friends and relatives were in Assamese – in short, except for unavoidable reasons Jatin Mazumdar never used any written language other than Assamese.

But recently he was having to spend most of his days outside Assam. His son Ramen worked for a national organisation. Ramen was his only son, so the situation forced him to move around with his son. Both of his daughters got married, and his wife died after the first daughter's marriage. So for a period Jatin Mazumdar became alone at his house at Gandhibasti. 'Nowadays the difference between sons and daughters has ceased to exist: daughters go away from the home, so also the sons, so the two old people have to become the support of each other; but I am unfortunate to be left alone by my old woman too' – thus he would lament in front of his friends.

Yet he had managed to live alone at the Gandhibasti house for two to three years, using the services of domestic helps. But gradually it became impossible to live in that way. He kept suffering from asthma; on the other hand it was getting hard to find faithful and sincere helpers, even on payment of a lot of money. Seeing such a plight of the father, one of the daughters had asked him to stay with them – the other one being unable to because of being in a very large joint family – but he couldn't imagine living

with his daughter and son-in-law: after all he had a son too, although he may be residing abroad (whenever Jatin Mazumdar remembered about Ramen residing outside Assam, the word 'abroad' invariably came to his mind); still that meant that there was a home of his son where he could live in his own right.

For a long time Ramen had been asking his father to stay with him, but Jatin Mazumdar had always refused. Own home, own relatives, own environment of living – in other words all these 'own things' were too strong attachments to be forsaken in lieu of a unknown place and an unknown environment. He felt he would be exactly like a fish out of water.

But at last the situation forced him to leave his home. His illness was increasing as were his troubles with the domestic helps. The last one finally vanished with some money and a bag given for marketing. Fortunately, he committed no other theft or robbery!

Yet Jatin Mazumdar would have searched for a new helper, and would have continued with a patch-worked life similar to his patch-worked body. But just then an incident at East Sarania, where the wife of one of his acquaintances was robbed of money and jewelry, and was even murdered by her domestic help at her house, cracked his determination – no, really he could not live alone any longer. Nobody knew on what day which domestic help would slit his throat. 'Days are becoming very bad. Nowadays people are killing people just as one kill insects. Open the morning newspaper and you'll see – there terrorists are killing people, there parents-in-law are killing their daughters-in-law, there members of one political party are killing members of another one, there the police is resorting to firing at the slightest provocation, there servants are killing their masters – really, the people have become bloodthirsty. Previously one used to be scared to move in forests because of wild animals, but now even in the modern cities full of diverse amenities offered by scientific discoveries one finds it difficult to live safely because of the two-legged animals.' – such a trail of thought engulfed his mind.

Jatin Mazumdar was finally compelled to leave his Gandhibasti house to live with his son 'abroad'. House! So old and related with so many memories was that house! In that paternal house he was born, he was brought up. Into that house he had brought his newly married wife. Here had been born Maadhaan, Edhaan (Ramen) and Bhanti. Then one by one the children had left this house, the wife also had left. And then he, the last creature guarding the house like a mythical yaksha, was also going to leave.

He had become old enough, and like his withered frame his heart and soul had also withered a lot; yet while leaving the house, two drops of tears appeared on his sunken eyes.

But still Jatin Mazumdar belonged to Assam, his permanent address being – Gandhibasti, Guwahati–3, Assam. Wherever he stayed, and for whatever period of time, that address was eternal.

Till recently Jatin Mazumdar used to travel with an old leather suitcase, but this time Ramen bought him a polymer-made V.I.P. brand suitcase. It was so convenient to write the name and address there! Holding the card in his hand, Jatin Mazumdar felt delighted like a child getting a new toy. Then on it he carefully wrote in nice, intact letters – ‘Jatin Mazumdar, Gandhibasti, Guwahati–3, Assam’. While writing he kept murmuring to himself – ‘After my death let me be born here again’ – he used to remember this poem by Nalinibala Devi frequently – particularly whenever Ramen wrote letters asking him to live with them ‘abroad’.

After opening the new chapter of his life at his son’s home in Jaipur, where Ramen was posted, old Jatin Mazumdar started to critically observe first Ramen’s house, and then the place and its people. ‘The house is not that bad, but it seems the other family sharing the house hobnobs with you a lot. I don’t like that much of hobnobbing with neighbours.’

n hearing about such reservations, the daughter-in- law Ruby smiled and said – "But father-in-law, the Mehtas are a very nice family. Mehta’s wife is the daughter of a minister, but she is so unassuming, well-behaved and simple that she doesn’t seem like a minister’s daughter. Before I came here, when your son was residing in this house alone, both the husband and the wife took very good care of him – just after he got up Mr. Mehta used to come with a cup of bed-tea – my husband used to say that with such a cup of tea made in milk he used to feel fresh throughout the day. And, at the beginning, what a lot of pigeons’ droppings did they clean! You’ll see afterwards, there are a lot of pigeons in Jaipur, in the old castles flocks of pigeons are there – our vacant house was also a den of a lot of pigeons – the Mehtas themselves carried buckets of water and scrubbed with brooms, finally getting the house cleaned! They didn’t listen to his many protests – instead arguing that he was new to their place, didn’t know the lifestyle there, he must have been already facing a lot of difficulties, without cleaning how would he stay here, he didn’t also have the tools for cleaning, they always had to clean pigeons’ droppings and so they are accustomed to that, and so on. And father-in-law, their three-year old daughter Parley is so lovely, you’ll see – she will make you feel like her own grandpa."

"My daughter-in-law is like that – once she opens her mouth she won’t shut it! What sort of a house did Edhaan take! As far as I understand the family occupying the other part would spoil the thing called privacy ......" thought Jatin Mazumdar.

After hearing the father’s objections Ramen said, "Father, the pleasures, comforts and advantages of one’s own house – how can you find that in a rented house? A house like the one we own in Guwahati would here require a very high rent – but however, you needn’t worry, the Mehtas are very nice, they don’t give any disturbance. Sometimes the little girl comes, but she doesn’t give any trouble, and on being asked leaves immediately."

After staying for two or three days with the son and the daughter-in-law, Jatin Mazumdar got rather bored. There were no friends and acquaintances – could one live like that? Naturally he started to roam around the city in the mornings and in the evenings. The son and the daughter-in-law also encouraged him to walk around – the

city of Jaipur is very beautiful, the roads are wide, almost at every home a carefully maintained garden is there – it is a land of deserts, so to keep the dry summer under control the people here take care to plant trees – so he would find it very nice. There were also many important sites to visit – on a holiday they could board a tourist bus together. Did he know that this city was renovated two and a half centuries back, with drains and wide footpaths etc., by Maharaja Jay Singh, enabling it to easily compete with any European city of that period?

But whenever he felt that Assam was being belittled in comparison with some other place, Jatin Mazumdar would say something supporting Assam, irrespective of whether that was necessary or not. Here also he said, "Oh these are dry places; not like Assam where rains come at every season, ruining the streets and the monuments. Yet within those limitations our Ahom kings constructed such matchless palaces, castles and temples some six hundred years back that the storms and the heavy rains of Assam has not succeeded in destroying them, not even the negligence of our archeology Department has ....".

n another day Jatin Mazumdar, after completing his morning walk, remarked – "I have noticed from the beginning that even though the streets are beautiful, the common people here sit down to ease themselves by the side of the streets, even the womenfolk not excluded. Our Assamese poor are however not like that, among all the classes of our people there is culture and good taste."

Against this opinion however the son and the daughter-in-law could not protest. But on another day, seeing the Amer Palace, the Jaigarh Fort, the City Palace etc., Jatin Mazumdar gaped with wonder, saying to himself – "I cannot but admit that in comparison to the hugeness, lustre and expertise of construction of these palaces and castles, our ancient monuments look rather like flies in front of elephants". Then seeing the flocks of pigeons flying away from the castles against the background of the setting sun's rays, a childlike smile appeared on his face. The description of this 'Pink City' by Aldous Huxley, who had come here as a visitor, came to his mind – it seemed as if those flying pigeons were coming alive from Huxley's description. It was written so long ago, describing this architectural wonder which was crafted like some immortal verse even hundreds of years before the essay – though the architecture remained immortal, its inhabitants had long been to their graves – Jatin Mazumdar felt like an obsessed man, a sort of sad compassion filled his mind. Some stanzas from the famous Bengali poem 'Shah Jahan', which he had almost got by heart in his college days by simply hearing his Bengali co-boarder Animesh Ray practicing for recitation in a college-week, came to his mind from the grave of the past and stroked in his heart – "The jingle of bells from the anklets of your city-beauties / Has died, only the crickets now make the night-sky weep ...... ".

After coming home from that visit, Jatin Mazumdar asked Parley to come near. After his arrival the child did come several times and peeped at him, but finding no response, she had to return content with the display of affection only from his son and his daughter-in-law. Now on being called by the old man smiling at her, she at first hesitated, but didn't move away from the doorstep either. After that, when he called her again, this time holding out a packet of 'gems' candy, she came haltingly, and sat down on his lap without any objection. Opening the packet she took a 'gems' to her mouth, and started the introduction – "Should I call you grandpa?"

From that day Jatin Mazumdar almost became a real grandfather of Parley. Coming at any hour to him, having various childlike chats with him, considering gifts of gems, toffee, cadbury's etc. from him as her birthright, detecting mistakes in his Hindi pronunciations despite being such a young child (don't say 'antha', say 'anda', don't say 'sof', say 'sonf' etc.), having walks with him holding his hands, offering biscuits to the neighbours' dog from his lap – as she was afraid to deal with it alone – and giggling with merriment at its taking the biscuits away – all these had got so entangled with his life that when Ramen was transferred to Calcutta it became hard to severe that bond. Parley's mother prepared soft Indian breads and vegetable curry for him for his journey to Calcutta,– so that Parley's grandfather might avoid taking food from outside as far as possible. At the time of farewell they presented a brass-made candle-stand engraved with Jaipuri handiwork, "We have heard that in Calcutta power cuts are quite frequent; whenever the lights go off at night, light the candles here and remember us" – Parley's mother said.

"But I needn't remember them by lighting candles; the eternal lamp that has been lit in my heart by that family will always be glittering in my soul!" he thought.

A few days after getting established in Calcutta Anando got the news of their arrival and came to visit them. His name was Anando Mukherjee, who had gone to Guwahati to work in a bank, and on being strongly requested by a friend Jatin Mazumdar had once rented out to him a room of his house.

Anando didn't come alone but had brought his newly married wife Bandana along. Both the husband and wife showed their respect to him in the Bengali way by touching his feet, and then presented the sweetmeats they brought.

After that, there was unfolded another chapter of life filled with heart's warmth. When Anando had been in Guwahati he had conquered Jatin Mazumdar's heart with his various good qualities, notwithstanding Mazumdar's racial dislike against the Bengali. The young man had learnt Assamese only within a few months, and even had got somewhat acquainted with Assamese literature and culture. Then Jatin Mazumdar had once told Anando with grief – "If your brethren living here for many decades had shown such interest like you for things Assamese, then possibly the relation between the people of these two communities wouldn't have been so hostile."

After being transferred to Calcutta Anando got married, and Jatin Mazumdar gradually discovered with delight that the Bengali 'daughter-in-law' was a step ahead of even Anando regarding the various qualities of heart. The Mazumdars went to Calcutta during a summer. When the days were becoming colder, Bandana one day came with a woolen scarf which she had knit herself, and said – "As you have asthma I have made this two-layered scarf for you. One of its ends can even be used like a cap. You'd possibly need it during the morning-walk."

Feeling the comforting warmth of the scarf, Jatin Mazumdar said in his mind, "Even if I wouldn't have got the warmth of this scarf, the warmth of your various kind gestures would always have kept my heart warm."

Next time, Ramen got transferred from Calcutta to Delhi. For the first several days Jatin Mazumdar compared the people of Delhi to that of Calcutta and grumbled; calling them impolite, heartless and so on. But one day a friend of Ramen from Delhi, Sushil Bhagat, who was working in Jaipur, came and started rebuking Ramen – "I wrote so strongly to you that our home is not far from this residence of yours, so I asked you to visit our home and express whatever difficulties you might face to my parents – but no, you have never come to visit them". The next day Sushil brought his parents for a visit, and invited all of the Mazumdar family for a lunch at their home. On that day, when Sushil's mother came to know from Ramen's wife that they hadn't yet got a gas connection, that it was likely to come only after a month or so, and that they were cooking on kerosene stoves with kerosene bought from the open market, she became very sorry for them and exclaimed – "Oh, in the controlled market we get so much ration of kerosene oil, you know it is hardly ever brought as we cook with cooking-gas, so this quota of oil can be bought by you: a lot of money will be saved. And do you want the rice sold in the controlled market? We mainly have breads, so the rice is almost never brought, but it is rather O.K. ......"

n that day Sushil Bhagat went back to Jaipur, and the next morning Sushil's old father came with a can of ten litres of kerosene and a bag of ten kilograms of rice on his two-wheeler. As the Mazumdars made a hullabaloo on seeing that, he said with a meek smile – "No, no I am not having any trouble while doing this, only you must be having trouble, you have come to a new place – so many types of difficulties you might be facing, you are our guests – it is our duty to take care of your troubles!"

In the period of the Mazumdar family's stay in Delhi, the Bhagat family performed their 'duties' to these Assamese 'mehman's (guests) in many other ways. Jatin Mazumdar once said in his mind – "Mr. Bhagat, even if we wouldn't have got the warmth of your kerosene, the many other displays of the warmth by all of you would have kept us warm for ever."

From Delhi Ramen was transferred to Guwahati. This time Ramen had tried for this transfer. The father had already become quite old, how many times should he be carrying his old frame from here to there? The last period of his life was coming near – during this time his mind must be longing for his own home, own friends (whoever still remained), own relatives. However, Jatin Mazumdar had never mentioned to his son any such desire, but Ramen knew the attachment that his father had to his home state. For the last ten years, wherever they might be staying, Jatin Mazumdar had kept the emotional connection with Assam intact. Ramen sometimes told his wife that his father read so many newspapers and magazines from Assam that even the people staying in Assam probably did not do so. "The other day father even sent a letter congratulating a journalist who regularly writes reports in a weekly – 'You deserve to be congratulated for the report on the Bengali school of Nagaon that you have rightly written, despite being a Bengali yourself. For a journalist this impartiality is very important', he wrote". Ramen smiled, "Even sitting in Jaipur father kept himself aware about the illegal Occupation of land belonging to the tribal belts by some non-tribals."

A few months after Ramen got transferred to Guwahati, Jatin Mazumdar died of old age. The relatives talked – "The soul of the old man was enclosed in his cage till now

just to be freed at his own place. Why, when in the last year his father became extremely ill in Delhi, Ramen did say that he was afraid of losing his father then."

After the funeral was over, one day, while trying to rearrange the earthly belongings of his father, Ramen was going to open the V.I.P. brand suitcase that he had bought for his father several years ago. Just then he happened to look at the card hanging from it; he remembered that there his father had carefully written his address in Guwahati. Taking the card in his hand Ramen slowly read the blurred letters inside the plastic cover – 'Jatin Mazumdar, India'. Jatin Mazumdar, India? Being somewhat astonished Ramen turned the card back – no, there also the address 'Jatin Mazumdar, Gandhibasti, Guwahati–3, Assam' was not written with the nice, intact English handwriting of his father; there also was written 'Jatin Mazumdar, India.'

Taking the card in his hand Ramen sat motionless. His eyes got filled with tears.

Futile Pursuit

Atanu Bhattacharyya

n Saturdays she does not have practical classes; the final bell for her theory classes rings at 11.35 am. After that she is supposed to return home. But, does she come home straight? Where does she go? As it is the last day of the week, doesn't she feel like spending a couple of hours somewhere? The way I tend to do something unusual like this at times; doesn't Irene feel like doing likewise?

It is Saturday, I am going to follow her today. My guess is, she will come into view under the emblic myrobalan tree near the main gate at quarter to twelve. Every 19/20-year-old girl in the world does spend an additional 15/20 minutes during a normal parting session. Irene is 20. Why shouldn't she fritter away 20 minutes on such activities?

But, it was seen that Irene did not take much time today. Within a few moments she crossed the college gate; she scanned the road for a rickshaw and finally, instead of heading homeward, got onto a rickshaw moving in exactly the opposite direction, along the road leading to the market.

I was sitting on an old scooter about ten metres from the college gate without being noticed by Irene. I was dressed in an old punjabi and a pair of matching loose trousers. Moreover, in order to prevent my face from being seen, I wore a full-mask helmet. To tell the truth, I was totally unaccustomed to such attire.

And yet, Irene was wearing a set of mind-blowing churidar-kameez. She looked like some totally unacquainted girl in that purple dress. The dupatta over her chest tended to become restless in a light breeze. The rattling of the rickshaw and the mischief of the wind started annoying her. I somewhat enjoyed the scene. Like a skilled artist I began to concentrate on her figure and the setting around her, as though for a moment I forgot about my relationship with her.

A speeding motorcycle coming from the opposite direction went past very close to my scooter. Two cyclists overtook me and went away, somewhat expressing their displeasure at my slow speed.

It is very difficult to follow a rickshaw on a scooter maintaining a particular distance. Even more difficult is for the pursuer to hide himself. On several occasions during that period, I felt the urge to smoke a cigarette. On many occasions I felt like overtaking her rickshaw. But actually, I did no such thing. I simply maintained a distance very carefully so that Irene would not notice me.

The people on the road somewhat displayed their busy schedule. A few college students coming to hang out during their off period, suddenly entered a restaurant. The hawkers got busy with the bundles of newspapers that came by the morning flight, right on the footpath. The traffic signal at the police point at the crossroads changed colour frequently. At the autorickshaw stand, the easy-going drivers dozed off in their autos. A few customers who approached them, turned away disappointed and began looking for other means of conveyence. In such a situation, Irene’s rickshaw stopped on the roadside very close to the autorickshaws. At once I hid myself in the parking lot on the ground floor of a multi-storeyed building nearby, along with my scooter.

I noticed that after dismissing the rickshaw-puller, she was heading for an aristocratic hotel. I trembled within, in an unknown fear. So many incidents could happen in these expensive hotels within just fifteen minutes! So many dealings took place in them within the night! What business did Irene have here?

I was alarmed and thought of shouting out to warn her. But, when a full-mask helmet is stuck to the head, calling out to someone is not possible. I removed the helmet and right at that moment noticed that Irene did not enter the hotel. Instead, entering the shop with a xerox machine just by the side of the hotel, she took out a bundle of papers from her bag. I waited at a cigarette shop nearby till she finished getting her papers xeroxed. Hurriedly having a few puffs at a cigarette, I wore my helmet again. Irene seemed to look in my direction once, but I guessed that she did not see me.

This time she was seen near a pharmacy. I clearly understood that she had taken out a prescription. I was worried again. Was she unwell? If she had any problem then definitely I should have known. Very earnestly I wished to know about the prescription. But I did not dare to come face-to-face with Irene. Of course, after she left the pharmacy I asked the salesman quite impatiently what medicine the girl who had just

come, had bought. But, with a suspicious look he coolly ignored my question. I became quite hesitant. The next moment though, I realised that waiting like that would serve no purpose. It would be proper for me to follow Irene again as soon as possible.

For a while Irene went missing from the periphery of my sight. With much anxiety I looked in the cosmetic shops on the roadside, searched for her in a Chinese restaurant and after a few tense moments, suddenly discovered her inside a telephone booth. Concealing myself very tactfully, I tried to see the phone number that showed on an electronic machine. The number did not tally with any of the numbers that I was familiar with. Of course, after listening with my ears pricked I was convinced that she had not indulged in any dangerous conversation. I felt reassured for a while.

But after she came out of the telephone booth, a youth who got busy greeting her with words like ‘hi hello’, addressed her in a different name. I noticed Irene answering that greeting with a modest smile. The youth must have suggested a cup of coffee; it looked like Irene refused the offer on the pretext of constraint of time. I enjoyed the whole scene, covering my face and concealing myself with a newspaper. I also liked the fact that Irene was behaving like a mature girl.

Forty minutes had passed since I followed her. Sometimes I wore the helmet, sometimes I would get tired carrying it in my hand. But, could I think of going back just because of that? Today is a second Saturday. Since my office is closed I have ample time in hand. When I have the time I feel like doing many different things. On different days, under different situations I wish to observe Irene – the way she walks, her odd mannerisms, her mode of talking.

Today Irene’s performance has been very satisfactory. There has been no restlessness in her walk, no hesitation or doubt in the way she has talked. She has been carrying out her duties like a responsible girl. She has been behaving like an experienced girl. I am very happy. I am observing her like a satisfied pursuer.

Where would she go now? She was seen stopping suddenly in front of a private hospital named City Nursing Home. Would she enter the nursing home now? What business did she have here? I began to follow her again. I observed her walking along the long corridor and tapping lightly on the door of Room Number 8. At that moment I waited at another point of the corridor. Irene spent 15 minutes there and as soon as she left, I asked an attendant in the room who was standing, what relation they had with the girl who had just left.

“The girl is Ruby’s friend,” the attendant said indifferently.

“Who is Ruby?” I asked.

He answered quite politely: “The patient’s second daughter.”

I had never heard Irene mention that she had a friend by the name of Ruby. Of course, it was not necessary that I should know everything about her. I didn’t waste time there. Coming out of the nursing home at once I followed her. Would she return home now?

No, walking some distance and then covering the rest of the distance by a rickshaw, she entered the college campus again.

Why? Didn't her classes end at 11:35 on Saturdays? Could be that her routine had changed. Could be that today there was some special occasion at college in which Irene's presence was indispensable. I waited outside for a long time and finally at one point of time, getting tired of waiting, returned home.

My wife asked me: “Where have you been so long?”

I gave her a smile and said: “Your daughter is no longer a small girl. She can do a lot of things all by herself. She can buy her own medicines, go to the nursing home and enquire about the health of her friend's ailing mother. It's just for nothing that we worry about her.”

A little bit of pride certainly mingled with the satisfaction in my statement. A kind of joy of success did glow in my weary body.

My wife stared at me for some time. I noticed tears forming in her eyes. I asked: “What's wrong? Why are you staring at me like that?”

This time she cried noisily and said in a choked voice: “What happens to you sometimes? Three years have passed since Irene died. Today again you followed some other girl. Why do you behave like that, hm?”

Fragrance of the Past

Mahim Borah

Mahim Borah is a poet and a fiction writer. He has several books to his credit, and won awards including Sahitya Akademy Award.

The old pensioner Janarddan Choudhury, now in his seventy-fifth year, returned from his usual morning-walk, and as usual, was going to wake up the still sleeping members of his family by shouting aloud at them, but then he stopped abruptly. For the last several years he has been regularly admonishing everyone of his family, servants not excluded, and tried to awake them on time. But that day when he heard with his own ears Bormaina, his eldest son, reporting to one of his friends about his father's habit (a form of torture he said), the old Janarddan Chaudhury felt that his ‘authority’ over the house was gone and that a new era had begun in its place.

He overheard in the middle of their talk – “In my father's time, they had many people to work, there were three or four servants, and no compulsion for studies at night.

Children were not given to do much home work. There was no club life, everyone could have a good sleep. Now with so many people and children, we have such a big family and only a boy and a maid to help and even they are changing daily. The women have to bring up their children, so it is quite natural that they do not get up early in the morning. My father is an old man, so he has less sleep, but he feels that no one ever enjoys sound sleep.”

Choudhury did not want to hear further. Immediately he took his walking stick in hand and went out to his friend Late Borkakoti’s place. He has to oversee the matrimonial arrangement of the only son of his friend Late Rajani Borkakati. So he has to go to them frequently.

Such complaints are always made by all against him. Even the servants and maids of the house complain against him. Bormoina once remarked, ‘It is because of our father that the servants change so frequently.’

That day Choudhury thought deeply about what his son said. He could not deny the complaints of his son. But for the last three years, that is before his wife left him alone in this world, why did he not understand fully what was happening now-a-days? Every morning when he went out for a morning walk to the river side, he needed to brush up, water to clean his face, a towel and his most important priority, the cup of morning tea, he always got those necessary things. But after his wife’s death, just after three and four months, these regular things became irregular. Among his three daughters-in-law, if one became a mother, another became pregnant, and may be the third one had a cold – this way all the rules have been changed.

The old man requires his meal at 10 am, the members of the house have school and office and that is why he regularly got his meal six days a week at the proper time. But on Sundays or on some other days, everything is different. That day rice would be served at one O’clock. But he remembers his wife had told all the three daughters-in-law about his gastric problem.

But with whom will he be angry now? With whom can he argue, with whom can get angry for a small mistake like delay in giving a cup of tea? She had left him three years ago. Nearly fifty years ago she sat with him in front of the sacred fire and thus she took her first step in this house, and suddenly three years ago, she had high blood pressure and forgetting her promises, left him alone in this world.

After marriage they became the parents of five children. After the marriage of their two elder daughters and even after the marriage of their third son, they felt it difficult to think that they were now really old. His wife gained weight, her hair lost its natural lustre, but he himself felt it hard to think that he was getting old. This is only an indication of age, he told himself, not old age itself. Because it was only the other day, he felt, that they got married. Like their youngest daughter-in-law, Bormoina’s mother came to this house as a newly married beautiful bride. Could time fly so fast! When? How has it gone? In this span of time they have sent their two daughters to their in-laws’ places, they arranged marriages for all the three sons, a wholly new life began before their eyes.

He still remembers the day three years ago. And that day he had felt a really different feeling. He had just left his wife in the funeral pyre and come back home. But when he entered the house, he felt the presence of his wife Bormoina's mother, in the house. He felt that time that she would come out and give him water and towel to clean his face, she would take the towel from him and would back to the kitchen and prepare some tea for him. She would go stand by him after giving the cup of tea.

As days went by, he keenly felt her absence. Why do men get married at a young age? They have plenty of sources in young age. They could lead a good life if they are not married. But in old age, a man is secure only with his wife. But for women, it is different, they are a distinct race – they can have some other interests like sons, daughters-in law, grand-son, grand-daughter.

He knows some men who get married in old age. He had even chuckled at those men in his young age. But today seventy five year old Janaddan Choudhury wants to tell the world in a loud tone that what he discovered in this world – yes, seventy five is the best age for a man to get married. Yes, the only security for a seventy five year old man is his wife.

The old man sits on the sofa of the veranda and different feelings come to his mind. ne by one everyone of the house starts to get up from bed. Everybody looks at him and hurriedly leave the place. But today he is not in a mood to shout at anyone. He can completely understand that an era has come to an end and a new time has come. In this new age, his position is irrelevant. This is life, this is nature.

Today is the date of taking his monthly pension, so he starts walking to the district court with a stick and an umbrella in hand. He does not want to ride a rickshaw today. In his time, a family could live simply by the money he got for pension. One day Bormoina told him that the money he gets from his monthly pension is hardly enough for his needs for a fortnight.

Though Bormoina told such things in relation to the present day situation of the state, Choudhury felt a slight ache in his heart. Then one day when Choudhury bought a bunch of Malbhog bananans for a rupee and seventy five paisa, he had to take to bed with a headache for three days.

To retrieve the money from the court is also another kind of experience. From Nazir's office he has to take the paper and then go to the treasury – but it is really painful. In the court, where he used to sit on chair in an office, now someone else is sitting. But now it is neither the same court building not the same room with that the huge ceiling fan which was made of wood and thin ropes.

Now it is a well-furnished room with electric fans, some costly tables and chairs and of course, the seats are always occupied by new faces. Unlike those days, now nobody welcomes him, nor do they show respect by standing up from chairs. Everyone wore disguised looks on their faces, specially those elderly pensioners.

He was stunned to discover that the clerks wanted money from him also, from him – who once worked here. But he knew that if he offered a single five rupee note to them to have a cup of tea, in no time they would protest and burst out 'No, no, what are you doing?' Really, they are now of no use. Even the Government itself does not need them. The Government wishes that they should not lead a long life and get pensions. Bribes were taken in their time also, even if somebody came without bribes, he did not talk to them properly. Still, things were not like today. Because the English saheb was very strict and if a common man complained before him, he very quickly took decisions.

Times have changed, even the place has changed. Even in the last five years, the Guwahati city has changed significantly. It was changing day by day. Not a single vacant plot was available. Houses, flats everywhere and the Jubilee field was destroyed by establishing some water tanks.

Some people have the reins of leadership in the state. They destroy the hills, cut trees and build houses. Everywhere it is full of unfed, unclad, ugly beggers. Were the present DC of Guwahati an Englishman, he would not have left the banks of the Brahmaputra as dirty as it is now. The people from other states have come to this place and established many factories, mills and finally settled down here. But where will the future generations of Assam go in search of even a simple job like of a peon or chaprassi? To which state? To those states where population has grown so much? He thought about the British rule – may be there was no independence, but Assamese people lived a good life at that time.

After counting the money he kept it in the pocket and a mixed feeling darkened the mind of old Janarddan Choudhury. Usually when he goes to Panbazar, he goes to a sweet shop and takes some sweets and goes back to his home. Even today he did the same thing. He thought of taking a rickshaw, because the city buses were always crowded with people. Even citybus goers don't like the old people, they don't want to vacate the seats. He gets down at Uzanbazar and as usual he goes to the fish market. Three years ago, he regularly bought boliyora and cheniputhi fish. Boliyora fish was his wife's favourite and he himself liked cheniputhi. But now he has lost interest in fish. Because fish is not available now a days and if he gets some, nobody can cook it to his taste like what his wife prepared. Anyway, after a long time, he has seen some really fresh cheniputhi fish and without any bargaining with the fisherman, he buys it for three rupee.

When he reaches home, he has givens the packet of sweets to his youngest daughter-in-law and the bag of fish to the maid servant and after washing his face, he lowers his tired body in the arm chair in the veranda. Unknowingly the two toes of his legs keep the rhythm of the song he is singing. Some strange chantings move in his lips like flying bees. Grandsons and daughters in-law can feel that after a long time their grand father or father-in-law is happy. Choudhury himself could not find out the cause of his happiness. Maybe the money he gets from the pension reminds him of his working age, his happiness, his past life.

Maybe the dazzling cheniputhi fish remind him of his wife like a light of a torch. But the dreams – in this state of mind, one should not imagine such dreams. 'Ah', he utters

a word and moves his body and waits for the cup of tea to be brought by his youngest daughter-in-law.

Very carefully his youngest daughter-in-law brings a cup of tea with some sweets in a plate.

Choudhury makes a movement to eat his favourite Lalmohan and shouts out suddenly, 'Makan, Makan, don't give these sweets to the children. These taste Sour!' He throws his sweet to a nearby crow. The dog in the corner run to have it and it almost takes out the piece from the beak of the bird.

Meanwhile, the children start coming from school and they enter the kitchen to have their meals. But after a few moments all of them rush out making some sounds like 'chee, chee; ouk, ouk' – holding their noses. Suddenly the maid comes out of the kitchen with the fish. She hides her face with one of her hands.

What happened? The oldman is still in the dark. The maid produces the fish and says 'Deuta, the fish is rotten. I want to clean them but the smell spreads everywhere.'

'Aa; how can it be so! I am not smelling anything bad. They are such fresh fish. I had examined them closely before I brought them.' He is still not getting the smell. Really amazing, all of them feel the smell, only he is not getting it. He has lost his sense of smell and it is a sign of his time for death.

The maidservant turns her face and speaks out 'Deuta, are you not getting the smell? It has spread upto one mile. Now a days the fishermen colour the fish. But when you bring it home, its colour has changed to black.'

'Throw it away, keep it in the corner of the kitchen garden. Put it near a citrus tree,' he says.

'Uh! Such types of injustice happening in the world!' He even throws the rest of the tea from the cup. 'Pour phenyl water in the kitchen ...' he shouts out in anger.

That day he went out for the walk earlier than before. Anger, dissatisfaction and hatred all such feelings rushed upon the old man. Now his hatred and weariness crossed the boundary from his house to the world.

He walked by the bank of the Brahmaputra. Now fish is being sold by colouring. This truth is known to the maid who works in his house. He can't cope with the world. Like the evening he thinks of the day – in this 75 years of life, he never experienced a day like today which is full of loss and bitterness.

The old man looks at the small boat in the river.

'Tawoi Deuta, have you come for the evening walk?' the old man is startled and he looks back. Near him a young married couple are standing . For a moment he looks at them, he tries to remember the faces. 'Tapan, see, my eyes could not recognise you

properly. But the address you used made me remember you. Oh, daughter-in-law has also come with you for walking.' He keeps his eyes on the bright face of the woman.

Suddenly she makes a move and touches the feet of the old man with her right hand, and holds her chadar in one hand. The old man suddenly withdraws his legs and keeps his right hand on her head. 'Enough, enough, be happy, my girl, now get up, it's OK. n that day you had visited my place. But I went to some other place, I had some work. Good matching, it seems great. God bless you.'

'OK Deuta, shall we make a move?' Folding his hands into a namaskar, Tapan takes leave from him.

His friend late Borkakoti's son Tapan was married just ten-twelve days back. Though he was the guardian of their marriage he did not see the bride before. Though the couple had visited his home, he was not at home that day and that is why this was his first introduction.

Borkakoti had got daughters from his first wife. When his wife died without a son, he got married again. But after seeing the face of his only son Tapan, he had to follow his first wife's road.

The old man will give the bride a gold ring. But the government has made the situation impossible by controlling gold. That day when he went to the bazar, he came to know what was happening around the world. Now gold costs rupee two hundred per gram.

Selfishness of the Government, like many problems, filled up the mind of seventy five year old Government pensioner Janarddan Choudhury. But suddenly all the waves of his mind calmed down. Some different kinds of feelings brought some fragrance to his mind and body, like the cool breeze of the Brahmaputra. The couple had left him just now and they let out a very pleasant fragrance. Where, when did he get the smell? The scent slowly calmed down his mind, body and person. Right, the scent has come from the hand which he kept on the brides head. What a surprise! Like a thief, he looked hither and tither and hurriedly took his hand upto his nose, and inhaled it to the full, turmeric, a variety of scented oils, a mixture of those scents could only have come from the hair of a newly married bride. 'All the scents of Arabia' are of no use before this. He knows the scent from the last fifty years. Seventy five-year old Janarddan Choudhury looks at the newly married couple. They then slowly become invisible in the mists of the cloudy evening.

The Journey

Purabi Bormudoi

n both sides of the small lane that leads off the main road are several beautiful two- and three-storeyed houses. About three of the houses have large iron gates on which are signs warning against dogs. In front of each are well-tended gardens with varieties of indigenous and seasonal flowers.

The first house belongs to the retired Deputy Superintendent of Police, Nilratan Majumdar. It is almost ten years since his wife had passed away. The daughter had been married off. Now his three sons are at home. The south-facing rooms of the house which has been conveniently built to accommodate the three sons, do not look out on a vista of natural beauty. What is seen, instead, is another small locality.

Actually, if the view from the south-facing windows of these tall beautiful houses had been an expanse of open greenery extending to the horizon, that would really have gone well with the houses. But what is seen is a mismatch. The locality that can be seen is no different from the bustees that are nowadays seen in any town or city in India. The same stink, dirty drains, a place where ill-fed undernourished people survive, bathing, eating and attending to all their natural needs in narrow confined places. Like other such places, here too people querral and wrangle with each other when they come to collect water from the one and only tap; dirty children roam around here and there the whole day; and the men and women go to work and return to their santies in the evening. The area becomes only as bright as whatever little light is given out by the lamps and the candles as long as they last. The people had no time to spare during the day, so in the night they spend a part of their waking hours squabbling and bickering among themselves.

The second house belongs to Paresh Hazarika, an engineer in the Flood Control Department. He worries constantly that there might be no floods, for that would mean a great loss to him. But even more than him, it is his beloved wife who is afraid of this prospect. On the top floor of their elegant three-storeyed house, in the spacious bedroom next to the puja room, his better half reclines in one corner of the large double bed, often contemplating the sky through the window. Anyone seeing this corpulent lady thus would have no doubts at all of her poetic prowess. But in reality one might say, she has no idea at all of the great significance of the clouds on the first day of the month of Ashaar. The point is that she wants rain, torrential rain, turbulent swollen canals and rivers, and ravaging, devastating floods. Rains mean floods, and floods mean an uncontrollable flow of funds. And money means happiness, comfort, liberty and distinction. Paresh Hazarika's gluttonous, flabby appearance makes it seem as though there's no space at all between his neck and his chin. He has a harsh, guttural voice. He likes to enjoy himself and have a little fun. Between the husband and wife there are often fights which sometimes cross all limits of decency and are heard by one or two of the neighbouring households. After such fights the neighbours gossip about them in hushed tones for a couple of days. The news spreads that Paresh Hazarika's beloved wife has suspicions about her husband's morals. And of course the hint is at that woman who lives nearby, Kamini...

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The third sky-grazing house belongs to Dr Bishnu Kumar Bordoloi. Like many other government doctors he too has an expensive and well-known nursing home in the town. Of his two sons, it is said that the elder one had, early in life, fallen into bad company and is now a drug addict. And the younger son, when he goes to the local college on his motor-bike, is a spectacular sight. He, meanwhile, is carrying on simultaneous affair with two girls in the same college without one knowing of the other, and the neighbours knowing all. Rumours flow thick and fast, and it is widely believed that he was the main culprit in the rape incident that took place at the other end of town some time ago. His father having money and influence, he narrowly managed to avoid falling into the hands of the police. He has also been seen going to Kamini's house.

But then, who doesn't go to Kamini's house? At one time all the sons of DSP Mazumder were her regular clientes. Even the father went occasionally. One day it so happened that the elder son came face to face with his father there. From that day something strange happened to the son. He had himself initiated into some baba's movement and renounced all worldly interests. He hasn't married either. It was his younger brother who got married recently. It is said that nowadays the elder son doesn't go anywhere or talk to anyone, but keps to his room, busy with puja and bhajans.

Kamini, of course, is really beautiful. She is one of those women who never seem to grow old, for they manage to stand still at one unchanging point of their lifetime.

The lane which runs through this locality goes straight and ends at the main road. By the side of the main road is a hotel, Ma Kamakhya, and from there she sometimes, no, you might say almost everyday, carries home some meat or fish curry is a tiffin-carrier. Whenever she goes to the hotel, she is sure to buy, from the paan-shop nearby, a meethapaan with 320 zarda. With the paan in her mouth, she buys, along with her other necessaries, a bunch of flowers from the flower-seller's shop and then comes home. Sometimes she buys the flowers first and goes to the Marwari Radha-Krishna temple a short distance away. In the evening, with her hair in a bun and the flowers in her hair and wearing a red sari, she stands by the window, her lips red from chewing the Zarda paan. And then it seems as though the fragrance of the flowers might call out to some passerby to stop for a while. At that time the red of her sari merges with the colour of her lips, and the evening appears to be bathed in this redish tint. As she walks down the road without speaking to anyone, or looking at anything, then even the elderly gentleman sitting on the Verandah lifts his eyes from the newspaper that he is reading. At the other end of the locality lives one who works in an office by day and writes poetry by night. It is said that all his poems somehow turn upon Kamini.

Are the men alone mad about Kamini's looks? Why, even the women, albeit disapprovingly, say, "She is beautiful. You have to admit that." When she goes to the temple after her bath, she lets her wet hair hang loose, covering it with the aanchal of her pink sari. The women ask each other why she always wears the pink sari and not the red one when she goes to the temple. But nobody seems to know the answer. However, it is for sure that such times her rosy complexion and the pink of her sari create a certain distinctive aura about her.

The Flood Control Department engineer’s flabby wife sometimes thinks, "Ah well, why will not men go to Kamini?" Perhaps she is jealous, for people say that her husband himself finds it distasteful to come close to her. And so, when she goes out in the car visiting or for attending weddings and other social occasions, it is but natural that any onlooker will have doubts about who or what weighs more, the woman or the gold ornaments that she wears?

It is rumoured that the girl who runs the beauty parlour, the one who has cropped her hair so short and so often that it’s almost non-existent, with her acne-scarred face, dressed in churidaar-kameez and who is only just over twenty-five years of age, met Kamini on the road one day, and asked her with all the gravity of a thirty-five-year-old woman, what she used on her face, which shampoo she washed her hair with, whether she ate salads or not and other such questions. But it is not known how Kamini answered her.

The young man, who works in the office dur ing the day and writes poetry at night, lives in the room at the back. In a room in the front of the same house, lives Ratan, the truck-driver. Actually nobody seem quite sure whether his name is Ratan, Rahmat or Robin. There never seems to be any occasion to talk about the truck-driver. During the week he is out of town for six days. And on the day that he spends in his small room, he has tea and his meals at Ma Kamakhya Hotel. He sleeps the whole day. At night he lies in bed singing songs from Hindi films, the sound just audible to the people living next door. In the morning he would leave, not to be seen again for the next five or six days. Sometimes he greets the gentleman sitting on the verandah with his newspaper; "Relaxing, Sir?" The gentleman, who had been an able teacher, was well known. If the teacher’s wife happened to come outside for some reason and Ratan caught her eye, he would ask "Baidew, how are you?" Other than this, he did not speak to anyone at all. As a matter of fact he hardly exchanged any words with the poet sharing the same house either. Sometimes as he strides down the road in the evening, his eyes alight on Kamini standing by her window and their eyes meet. This is the time when Kamini’s body is enveloped in the fragrance of the flowers in her hair. It is the time when the colour of her paan-stained lips and her sari resemble the tempting red of an apple, begging to be devoured. It is the time when the bewitching smile in her eyes can intoxicate without glass after glass of wine being drunk. His footsteps falter near her window. And though he walks past, his mind lags behind and lingers at Kamini’s window. He is like a nomad, here today, there tomorrow. And his trip someday might just be his last. He has been to many places, but doesn’t remember ever seeing a woman like Kamini, so graceful and so alluring, so like a dream, a poem. He often thinks of her as he lies in bed. He longs intensely to go to her. But the next day, when he comes face to face with her in Ma Kamakhya Hotel or on the road as she comes back from the temple, he is afraid of looking into her eyes.

Kamini uses her body as her capital, to stay alive. It is heard from different sources that like a woman destined to be a devoted wife that follows the rules of the world, she too had come to this locality with a tall, dark, moustachioed man and had rented this house. That man was, people said, her husband. In time there was a baby too, but it lived for six months only. Another six months later, the man too left, for no one knew where. But she didn’t leave the house, and turned it into her establishment, with her boy for sale.

"Ah! what would it have been like," he wondered. Although he did not write poetry, the truck-driver had a mind that lusuriated in poetic fancies. As he lay in bed humming the old raag based Hindi film songs, he sometimes felt like penning a few lines of poetry. The just-washed shine of the long hair that cascades past her waist! The aanchal of the pale-pink sari covering the wet hair! The pink of the sari ripples and plays over her smooth body like some skilful magician showing off his art! Her baby is at her breast !
h! how that woman is as happy as a bird and as soft as that shade of pink! It is she who was once a devoted wife, a loving mother, and is now this woman-Kamini, who is the desired and beloved of many!

It is only natural that the truck-driver, like everybody else, should also think of Kamini as merely a shopkeeper, selling her wares. He did; and was also aware that the window on the other side of the narrow lane was hers, and on this side, his. On the one day of the week that he spends at home, he understands only too well what amorous games are played behind Kamini’s closed window. People come and people go, and he knows what the coming and going is all about. He too had drunk at many shores and has treasured lovers at many ports. He knows men and women for what they are when he sees them. It’s not that he does not want to open his door and knock at Kamini’s window just across the road.

He kept thinking he would go and knock, when one day something happened. Tossing and turning in a fever, he must have at one time called out, "Ma, ma". He was drowsily aware of the familiar footsteps of his mother as she came into his room, She gently placed her slightly trembling hand on his forehead. His mother’s smell assailed his nostrils; it was a milky smell. She sat by him changing the cold pack on his hot forehead, and fanning his head. In spite of the fever, his mind, like a young calf with its mouth at its mother’s udder, leapt with joy. He wanted to place his head on his mother’s lap, when he heard her tender voice.

"Are you awake? Are you feeling a little better? Oh, you really scared me. Thank God I was awake."

"Ma, when did you come?" It was only then he remembered that his mother had been dead for a long time now. "Who?" he opened his eyes. "Oh, its you? When did you come?"

"Yes, it’s me. You had been calling out in your sleep."

His fever was gone. and now when he remem bers how he had mistaken Kamini for his mother, his mind is filled with joy, and the image that comes to his mind now when he thinks of her is that of a woman holding a child in her arms.

That Kamini, of whom many were enamoured, and who was so graceful and captivating, died today. No, she had actually died a couple of days ago. It’s only today that people have come to know about it. On seeing her closed house, neighbours thought that she had gone somewhere, as she was used to do, and would probably return in a day or two. But when a nauseous stench came from the house, people, fearing the worst, broke open the door and went inside. On entering, they held their

noses and rushed out. Even these people who were used to living unclean lives all among could not bear the filthy, dreadful sight. The woman is still wearing the red sari and the dried flowers are in her hair. The sari, untidily draped over her body, is soaked with the fluid that has seeped out of fissures in her swollen body. Kamini’s uncovered breasts, her stomach, both her feet and her distorted face with the spittle caked and dried on it, can also be seen. On her body is a black swarm of flies. The once beautiful, captivating and graceful Kamini is now lying in the filth and excrement of her own body.

There was at once a commotion. Someone went running to inform the police. Someone else took the news to those respectable families, who, though living near and using the same road coming and going, are many miles removed from them. Just as a stone thrown up a still surface of water creates a disturbance, so too the locality’s Sunday luxuries were disturbed by rippes of restless excitement.

From the south-facing windows of the tall houses this locality is clearly visible. At one time there were two krishnasura and a bogori trees here, and the place was open and breezy. And it was for this reason that several families had bought plots of land and built houses here. As the town gradually expanded in this direction, the main road was widened. In no time at all there sprang up a dhaba for truck-drivers, a cinema hall, a petrol station and a couple of scooter and motor repairing workshops. A girl started a beauty parlour. Soon both sides of the road were chock-a-block with shops, food-stalls and workshops. The oil and grease spilled by the workshop destroyed the grass growing by the roadside, and slowly even the grass in the green field at the back turned black and began to die out. A pool of stagnant water collected around the bogori three and the tree withered away. Moreover, close by the workshops was a Bihari man who dealt in odds and ends of iron and steel, and empty liquor bottles. He began to throw the broken, useless bottles around the tree. One of the krishnasuras died. The red flowers on the other became sparse. Now only a couple of flowers seem to bloom reluctantly on one or two branches. The other branches look like some impoverished, homeless, beggar-women. Further, the dirty water from some of the food-stalls nearby also flows into this place, and the earlier notion of the area being clean, open and breezy is now given the lie. Taking advantage of these conditions, there came at first some ill-clad, and squalid people who began working in the neighbouring houses and scrounging around for discarded tins, bottles, books and newpapers, and these people gradually put down their roots and settled in the area. Now, like a pimply scar standing out on the face of a young beautiful girl, this locality was a blot on the other.

The people in the tall, handsome houses got the news almost at the same time. Although nobody wanted to show that they know Kamini, they knew her only too well. So, though they asked, feigning ignorance, "Kamini? who’s Kamini?" they all understood that it was Kamini -- that Kamini!

The DSP came to know, so did his son. The engineer, his wife, and his son too got the news. The wife and sons and the Doctor himself also heard. Yes, it is that Kamini who is dead. The sound of bhajans being rendered in a more than usually soulful manner came wafting from the room of the DSP’s son, the one who had renounced the world. The DSP lowered his head. The Engineer was at home. His wife said, "Do you hear me, Kamini’s dead." "Who’s Kamini?", he asked, and took a deep relieved breath. "Who’s

Kamini? So you don’t even know her! Don’t you pretend! As if I don’t know anything! Why, am I less attractive than her?" Furiously she lunged towards him. Afraid of her aggressive posture, the engineer went outside.

The elderly retired schoolteacher got the news. The young man writing poetry by night and working by day, and the truck-driver came to know as well. Men and women from the respectable locality all gathered in front of the teacher’s house. His wife came out with tamul paan. They chatted, and there were many topics. The women started off by referring to kamini’s red sari, the flowers in her bun and her long lustrous hair, and then the torrent of words carried with it subjects as varied as knitting patterns and whether small fish cooked with ginger, garlic and chilies tasted better than that cooked with a dash of lime. The men discussed the probable cause of Kamini’s death. Nobody had heard of any sort of illness. Even on the last day she had gone to Ma Kamakhya for muttom curry. And in the evening she had stood by her window dressed in her red sari with the flowers in her hair. Then?

Then? Something must have happened. After all, people need just one thing to be the cause of death. The former teacher said, "And that too for a fallen woman like Kamini." Used to speaking in decent language, he did not like to use the word for prostitute and referred to her as patita, which means fallen or degraded. The engineer’s wife did not hear the whole sentence, only the word patita. She, barely managing to scrape through college, had been unable to secure a seat at the University, and had instead got herself enrolled for her MA in the newly opened department of Assamese at a local College. But she could not take the MA previous examination; she fell in love and got married. Trying to make out the meanings of words was a habit she had acquired at that time. Now she struck by the word used by the teacher. She saw the resemblance between the word pati and patita and concluded that pati was the root word from which the other probably derived. Not probably, but for sure, she thought. So it appeared plain to her that since pati means husband, patita means a woman to whom the husbands go. Hah, as if I don’t know all those who used to go to her! It’s not my husband alone. So if anybody says, anything to me, I’ll let the cat out of the bag. But, oh, she has saved me by dying! In a moment, the woman’s fat face brightened up..

Between discussions on knitting patterns and cookery skills, speculations on what caused Kamini’s death continued among the women. Someone said it could have been a fever. Nowadays even a fever caused by a common cold could not be taken lightly. Since she was a woman of bad character, she may have had some ‘bad’ disease. Such people have all kinds of diseases, and now there’s even one called AIDS. Perhaps she died of that. Who knows?

What do you mean by "perhaps"? Of course, she had AIDS. That’s right, Kamini had AIDS. Without any medical tests being conducted, it was firmly established that Kamini had AIDS. There’s proof too. She had told some people that she had been unwell for several days, That she had been feeling feverish. It is said she had even bought medicines from the pharmacy for her fever. What was the need then for any other AIDS test?

The moment it was confirmed that Kamini had AIDS, the gathering of women in front of the teacher's house scattered like grassshoppers and all went to their own homes. To their own homes and then their own puja rooms. "O God, Ma Kali, Satya Sai baba, save -- save us -- save us. Will I catch it toooo? Will I too die like Kamini? He used to go to her so often. You've died Kamini, but you've dealt me a death blow!"

The women prayed in fearful squaky voices. Their deep heavy breaths made the air of the locality as warm and humid as it is before the rains come pouring down.

The police arrived. It was decided that a post-mortem would be conducted on Kamini's body. It was brought outside just as it was, along with the cot on which it lay. The respectable stood at their respective windows, while the others crowded around Kamini's front door. Along with the corpse, a swarm of flies came buzzing out. The flies fell on the hands and faces of those standing nearby. People living in the tall handsome houses, and those living in the low shanties saw the horrible sight of a graceful captivating Kamini turn into a ghastly spectre in death. A spectre smeared with her own slimy filth and excrement. She, who had made the evenings enchanted by the fragrance of the flowers in her hair, was now a sickening, nauseous corpse. And all of them saw Kamini, a repulsive Kamini, going off all alone, first for the post-mortem, and then for her little spot under the earth like a heap of foul garbage.

From his window the truck-driver too saw an intoxicating evening, a bunch of flowers in a bun, a cascade of freshly washed hair; but a noble loving heart filled with dignity and purity, was on its final journey. With the aanchal of her pink sari covering her wet hair, his mother was about to leave. And strangely, like a son's heart losing his mother, the truck-driver's hardened heart was beaten by a storm of grief.

Madhumati

Nirod Chaudhury

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Why am I hesitating to tell you the story of Madhumati? I have asked myself this question over and over again but I don't get an answer, an answer that satisfies me. It is not that I don't want to tell. I do. After telling you about Smita, Monideepa and Shrababati, I have been meaning to tell you about Madhumati too. Just as Atanu had urged me to, Atanu who believed that I am the best person to do so. Simply because I was his sole confidante, or was there another reason?

n a misty winter evening, when darkness descends all too soon, Atanu, my friend from the college days, suddenly barged into my house. I was surprised at his appearance, completely unexpected as it was and dishevelled and distraught in manner. True I had not met him for a year or so but I definitely remembered him as a cool, dapper individual. As far as I knew, he was working as a Medical Officer in Sadasiv Tea Estate. Now he blurted out that he had left his job. I was surprised. People don’t quit well paid jobs when these are so hard to come by around our parts. Atanu told me that he was here to tell me all about it. He even made me swear that I would tell his story to the world. By the way, he did not reveal the name of his heroine. Madhumati is a name I have chosen.

After reading my stories about Smita, Monideepa et al, Atanu commented that I was taken in by appearances. I had not been able to delve into the psyche, get beneath the skin as it were. Perhaps he was right. It is not always possible to unravel the intricate emotional network every individual presents. We come across so many of them in our lives. Maybe we make do with the outer framework most of the time.

But let me not digress. Let me tell you about Madhumati instead.

In the month of Magh, when the vivid crimson of the Simalu sets the forest afire, Atanu saw her for the first time. Saw her beneath the Kadam tree, the dusky Santhal girl wrapped in a knee-length coarse cotton sari with a garishly patterned blouse setting off her earthy appeal. He was stunned to encounter such beauty amidst the women toiling around the tea bushes. The colourful glass bangles, the silver anklets, the chunky necklace, the kohl lined eyes, the bemused young man took it all in. The sensuality of this untamed creature as wild as the nameless flower stuck on her tightly coiled hair set his pulse racing. Atanu saw her everyday, morning and evening, coming to fetch water from the tap near his house at the end of the Babu Line. Everyday he waited for her to come.

Apart from Madhumati, life in the tea- garden had no variation for him: to the hospital and back. Returning from work one day, he noticed a crowd near the factory. The labourers looked anxious but Atanu didn’t wait to enquire. The life of these people always seemed to revolve round some incident. There was never a dull moment, the mundane placidity that comes with ease. He had no wish to find out and involve himself in their affairs. However it turned out that he had to. Line sardar Malia called out and the urgent “Daktor Babu, come this way” could not be ignored. He was led to a woman with a toddler on her lap. The skinny little thing had a rag bandage on his right leg and the blue of the face said it all. After examining the fang marks, Atanu brought him over to the hospital. Very carefully he tried to draw out the blood from the affected area but after a while realized that the child had become colder than the needle in his hands.

He broke the news to the people waiting outside. This was a part of his job he hated. The shock, the grief, the hopelessness haunted him, made him aware of his inadequacy. Now he could hear a woman wailing. He looked at the boy lying deathly still on the impersonal hospital bed. Reminded him of a wan little flower robbed of its lustre and felled to the ground by blight. Suddenly, the door to his room was pushed open and a woman burst in. She looked at him, her eyes flashing fire. She was drenched in sweat and breathing fast. Atanu recognized her. Madhumati. Without a word, she picked up the boy and put her cheeks against his ice cold face. Crying all the

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while, she stumbled out of the room. The boy's mother was lying unconscious on the verandah outside. Someone picked her up and they left, a line of people crawling along like a spineless, insignificant caterpillar. At the very end was Madhumati. In her arms she held Etuwa Tanti's dead child.

Atanu was depressed. Though he knew that he could not have saved the child, he had a feeling of guilt. It was as if he had flicked off an ant creeping up his arm and then felt sad at having crushed out its tiny life. Sukhdeo, the chowkidar, came in and lit the hurricane lamp. He too seemed weighed down with sorrow. That was Etuwa's only child, he said. The couple was childless for a pretty long time. Then they met a Babaji who had come from the mainland during Holi once. He had given an amulet which had worked wonders. Etuwa's wife was still unconscious, it seemed.

A doctor does not have the luxury of spending sleepless nights over a patient's death. The unexpected and unprecedented quirks of the human body see to that. Atanu was no exception and was kept busy combating fever, festering wounds, and various stomach ailments, besides the stubborn bouts of superstition. A few days later, he noticed a woman sitting in the garden outside his hospital chamber. Madhumati again. She had not come to fetch water since the child's death. He supposed it was her misplaced anger. As he was writing out the prescription for the last patient, Sukhdeo came in with a stranger. He was a strapping young man with a scarf round his neck. In his hands, Adivasi style, he carried a bow. Atanu acknowledged his salaam and enquired about his problem. He replied that it was not he but his wife who needed a doctor. Hiding his irritation, Atanu asked him to bring her in. He did so and in came Madhumati, strangely subdued and almost pleading in her manner. She stopped her husband from answering the doctor's questions and went out with him. Then she came in alone and confided in Atanu about her problem. He examined her, told her not to exert herself and prescribed some medicines. As she went out, he noticed that her husband Budhan was standing near the trolley tracks aiming an arrow at a pair of doves flying past.

In the peaceful ambience of Sadasiv Tea Estate, Atanu was not at peace. The lush green of the tea bushes extending to the horizon, the gigantic chimneys belching black smoke, the small row houses of the Labour Line, the sounds of Madol and Jhumur, the Sunday revelry of the men and women dousing their week-long fatigue with heady draughts of Haria, all these transported him to a world of magic. He wanted to lose himself in this world of unending greenery and carefree abandon and drown in the black pools of Madhumati's eyes.

The eyes seemed to follow him everywhere and the owner filled his waking hours with thoughts utterly mad and disquieting. At times he wished that he could go back to being his old sober self but Madhumati had other ideas. She presented herself in the hospital and at his house at odd moments. Her roles were varied: sometimes to sweep his verandah, sometimes to bring him fruits and vegetables from the garden, sometimes even to snatch the stethoscope and hold it against her breast. It was as if she was using all the wiles at her disposal to tempt him with the forbidden fruit. Her tinkling laughter and come hither looks were pregnant with unspoken promise. He didn't know how long he could hold out with his weapons of prudence and superior breeding but so far he was.

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About a month later, Budhan came and told him that his wife was unwell and wanted to be admitted in the hospital. The small establishment had no such facility for the labourers but a new Female ward was being built and he as MO could allot Madhumati a bed. When she came with her husband, she was no longer the seductress but a tired woman weighed down with months of pressure and worry.

"Please give her back her laughter", Budhan pleaded.

A few days passed and Atanu heard the laughter again. This time it expressed unalloyed happiness rather than tingling allurement. She clasped her newborn with a mother's infinite tenderness. When Budhan came to fetch her home, he was full of gratitude for the doctor. He held the infant in his arms with the fierce protectiveness of a kite shielding its young. Bidding them farewell, Atanu wrote out a prescription and told the man to bring his wife and child for a check up at the hospital soon. As the couple left with their baby, Atanu remembered an earlier scene, a totally different one, of Madhumati trudging along, holding Etuwa Tanti's dead son in her arms.

Post childbirth, the temptress seemed to have disappeared into thin air. Gone were her sudden appearances at all hours of the day. At first Atanu missed the sensuous presence he had got used to in the last few months but, gradually, she ceased to trouble his conscious self.

ne evening, he was on his way back after attending a patient at a distant Labour Line. The sky was overcast and ominous black clouds threatened a downpour at any moment. As he crossed the gate to Line No. 4, he noticed Madhumati sitting with her infant on her lap. He approached her to enquire about her and the baby's health. She started as if she had seen a ghost. When he reached out to examine the baby, she clutched it to her heart and screaming maniacally, rushed off in no particular direction. Seeing her run, a few passersby followed her. Utterly flabbergasted, Atanu hesitated, and then slowly made his way home.

Darkness descended with the swiftness peculiar to this easternmost tip of the country. The shadow of the surrounding Patkai hills loomed large, deepening the gloom of the sultry evening. Atanu's mood matched this gloom. He was just sitting down with a cup of tea when there was a commotion outside. An alarming scene met his eyes when he opened the door for a look. Fifty odd men and women were gathered in his compound. They were calling him the worst possible names in voices raised in anger. Taken aback, the doctor, who was used to reverence rather than abuse, asked them what the matter was.

"You have tried to molest our woman. An educated Babu, you have behaved dishonourably with somebody else's wife," they screamed.

Bristling in righteous anger, Atanu asked them to shut up. Somebody in the crowd retaliated by throwing a spear at him. The situation threatened to get out of control but Sukhdeo's presence of mind saved the day. He pulled the doctor inside and slammed the door. He, along with several Babus who lived nearby, managed to placate and eventually disperse the mob.

The next day, the manager called him to his office and asked him to resign. The labourers had come to him with the complaint that Atanu had dishonoured Budhan's wife. The woman herself had complained. Things had become volatile and it was no longer possible to retain the doctor's services. Atanu told me that he did not try to prove his innocence and left Sadasiv Tea Estate the very next day. Thus ended Madhumati's story.

Atanu confessed that his infatuation for the Adivasi woman was almost adolescent in fervour but he had kept himself in check. He had never made any sexual overtures. In fact, it was the woman, married and about to become a mother, who had tried to seduce him. Then why the sudden change of heart once the baby was born? It was as if she wanted to remove him, Atanu, from the scene. She tried to keep her son away from the doctor at all cost. When I sat down to pen this tale, what ending would I devise, he asked. Would I seek a reason for Madhumati's strange turn around? In the fact that she had attained motherhood at a great cost, her two earlier pregnancies having come to naught? In her belief, perhaps, that the doctor would be careless in his duties unless she offered herself as a bait? Once her purpose had been served, her baby born without a mishap, he could go to hell, or at least out of her territory? Did Etuwa's child having died, literally in Atanu's hands, play in her mind? Did she see a similar fate for her precious infant if he was around?

Would I portray Madhumati as a selfish, calculating, heartless female or as one suffering from an undecipherable mental turmoil?

r would I leave her story open ended? Without an effort to delve, to explain.

I simply do not know as I do not know what has become of Atanu Dutta or his lady love that never was. That is why after telling you about Smita, Monideepa and Shrababati, I took so long to tell you about Madhumati.

The Prisoner

Harekrishna Deka

Harekrishna Deka (b. 1943) is a poet, short story writer and a critic who received the Katha Award (India) for creative fiction (1994) for this story. He is a prominent literary figure in Assam. He also received the Indian Sahitya Akademy Award (1987) for Aan Ejon, a collection of poems. (You can read some of his poems here.) This story was written in Assamese and first published as Bandiyar in Gariyoshi, an Assamese literary periodical, in October 1994.

They had been cycling all the afternoon. It was now close to sunset. He was now totally exhausted. If only it was possible to snatch some rest!

It was as though the boy pedalling alongside had read his thoughts. He suddenly signaled a stop, and got off his bicycle.

He too alighted from his bicycle. The first thing he noticed was the beautiful surroundings. It was a spot abutting the hills. A stream coursed down the hill and gurgled passed a huge rock. The soothing sound of flowing water wafted across to them.

The boy walked his bike close to the rock and motioned to him to do so too. When he approached the rock, he was able to get a closer look at the stream. A clear ebullient flow – like a pahari girl running down a hill in gay abandon. The simile flashed through his mind spontaneously and unbidden. These days, whenever he saw anything free or unfettered, his mind would start searching for similes.

The boy stood on the rock and looked around him. He then unhitched the bag from his shoulder and turned to him. “There is nothing to fear here,” he said. “You had better get some rest.”

The word fear created a strange reaction in his mind. The number of nuances that could lie hidden behind the simple meaning of a small word! His eyes flitted to the bag that the lad had taken off his shoulder. He could guess what was in the bag, even though the boy kept it hidden from him. This thing should have become the symbol of fear for him. But strangely, without his realizing it, the thoughts in the boy’s mind had influenced him too: There was nothing to be afraid of here, because army or police security forces were unlikely to come here.

But was it an army platoon or the police he was afraid of? Should he not really be afraid of what was in the youth’s shoulder bag? Yet, the boy’s words had freed his mind too of fear. And what surprised him more was the fact that the thing inside the bag, as also the presence of the boy had given him a sense of security was a source of assurance.

As if to prove his freedom from fear, the boy said, “It is hot. I am going to take a dip. How about you?”

It was not that he did not feel hot. Though summer had not yet set in, the air was humid and he felt a sort of itchy sultriness. But he did not want to have a bath at an odd hour. He could catch a cold or start coughing – that could create problem for him and the boy.

He shook his head to indicate his unwillingness.

The boy took out a hand made towel, a gamosa, from the bag and got into the stream. There was not much water there. The boy started bathing without a care in the world.

His eyes flitted to the bag once again. It lay abandoned on the rock. How carelessly the boy had left it lying there! At times he found all this very strange. It was as though a sort of tacit understanding had developed between him and the boy, and the weapon in the bag was a symbol of that relationship – a relationship that had undergone a qualitative change over the last few days. It was not fear any more but a conviction of sorts that kept him bound. The boy had begun to believe that he would not escape. He could take the weapon from the bag and flee whenever he wanted. He knew he would not do it. This gesture of the boy seemed to alter the very tenor of his imprisonment.

He stretched out face up on a patch of grass near the rock, in the shade of a tree. Time enough for a brief rest while the boy finished bathing. His eyes fell on the branches of the tree. A pretty bird with colourful plumes sat quietly on one of them. He kept gazing at it. And two words turned into a cliché' with frequent use, passed through his mind – free bird. He had never bothered to develop a rapport with nature and he could not identify the bird. A kingfisher maybe. A long beak. Blue feathers. Perhaps there were fish in the stream and an unbreakable bond tied the bird down to the place. Free bird!

The boy came out of the water with loud splashes. Frightened by the sound the bird flew off.

The youth put on his clothes, wrung out his wet gamosa and put it in the bag. He then slung the bag on to his shoulder and said, “Let’s go. We must reach the village before dusk.”

They got on their bicycles and set off again – he in the front, the boy behind him. A hostage and his keeper. Both pedaling away with the single objective: To reach some haven far from army and the police. In some mysterious way, it was as though he had instigated his own captivity, as though he too now shared the anxiety of the boy and the others in his organization when they got to know of the coming of troops. And whenever they learnt that the troops were withdrawing or when they managed to move him to a safe shelter, it was as though he too, like them, was freed from anxiety.

The narrow track widened a bit. bviously they were not very far from their destination. They could see the ruts on the path made by the wheels of the bullock-carts. They were now riding abreast. He looked at the boy. A composed, unperturbed face. As though he was sure that there was no possibility of the army or police reaching that place. The boy’s impassiveness filled his mind too.

His eyes fell once again on the bag slung so casually on the boy’s neck. It was as though the weapon in the bag just fulfilled a ritualistic need. It was no longer a messenger of death. Yet it signified a certain authority; yes a certain relationship. But was that all? At one end of the black metal barrel, he was the prisoner; at its other, it held the boy prisoner. All of a sudden he remembered the kingfisher. A free bird, but a strange relationship bound it to the stream. It was free, but in the context, it was a prisoner. He was a prisoner. Yet, the boy could go nowhere without him, imprisoned as he was by his hostage’s captivity. Until he was released, the boy too could not be freed. And the authority of this lifeless weapon controlled the relationship between the two of them with its mute language.

Suddenly the boy stopped. Two other boys emerged from behind a wayside tree and advanced towards them. He was taken aback. He had not noticed the two boys waiting by the road.

The boy who had traveled with him, indicated by a sign that there was nothing to worry. These two boys were obviously from the same organization. They too had a bicycle with them. The boys asked them something in their language, a tribal dialect.

He seemed reassured by their reply. He mounted his bicycle again, and soon they were all on their way.

It was nearly dusk when they finally reached their destination. He noticed a group of boys sitting on a bamboo platform at the entrance of the village. They had no firearms with them, just a few long sticks. There was a kerosene lantern on one side of the platform. These boys probably got together to keep watch. The boy got off his bicycle and said something to the other two boys, in their own language, before they proceeded to the village.

It was a tribal village, tucked deep into nowhere. The huts had thatched roofs and walls of thinly spaced reeds. It was nearly evening and everyone was busy getting the cattle home. The one or two people they met on the way, evinced no curiosity about the stranger. Perhaps the organization had brought other people there, people like him.

There were signs of grinding poverty in the homesteads and streets of the village. Even so, this had not quite succeeded in undermining the healthy look of the few people he happened to see on the way. Nor did he see signs of extreme poverty in the house in front of which they finally stopped. Actually, it was not one house, but two. By the side of the main dwelling was a single-roomed hut with a sloping roof. Though the roof was thatched, the walls were neatly plastered with mud. The courtyard was spotlessly clean. He noticed a large granary next to the hut. There was also a large plot of cultivated land at the back, which had areca-nut, betal, jackfruit and even a plantain grove. All around the house was a close-knit bamboo fencing. The entrance had a bamboo stile.

The boy turned to him and said, “We shall stay here today. This is the gaonburha’s house. There is nothing to fear anymore.”

The other two boys who had escorted them, undid the bamboo bars of the stile and called out to the village chief as they stepped into the courtyard. The gaonburha had evidently gone out and had not yet returned home. But his son came out and ushered them courteously into the one-room hut in the corner.

Inside was a rough, armless wooden chair. They asked him to sit on it. On one side of the room was a low wooden bed. The sheet that covered it was coarse but spotlessly clean. A faint smell of fresh earth mixed with cow dung lingered. Obviously, it was not long since they had wiped and cleaned the room. It was on that very day that the gaonburha had been told of their coming – the decision to move him to this village had been sudden. Normally the business of changing the locations was accomplished under cover of darkness. But this was an emergency. They had learnt only that morning that a group of soldiers would reach the place where they were staying. So they had to flee the place on bicycles, and by day. Someone had been sent that morning to inform the gaonburha.

The gaonburha’s son reappeared, carrying a small bucket of water, a brass ghoti and a clean gamosa, and requested him to have a wash. He was taken to a small enclosure of woven bamboo partitions set up beside the hut. Inside the enclosure, they had even placed a stone slab to prevent the splashing of mud while bathing. And because it was

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already dusk, they had thoughtfully hung kerosene lantern on one of the bamboo partitions. When he saw the green, still-undried, bamboo strips that made up the partitions, he understood that this had been built just for him. For them he was a guest. Did they know he was a prisoner? But then how could they possibly think that of a man who appeared to move around so freely?

He felt very comfortable after he had washed his hands and face. He returned to his room after drying himself with the gamosa. A lantern now lit up the room. His young companion was waiting for him and rose from the chair as soon as he entered. Even though the boy did not utter a word, he sensed a certain respect in that gesture. He sat on the bed instead of the proffered chair, and asked the boy to sit down.

“You must be very tired today,” the boy said. “Rest. This time we may have to spend a few days here. Then we shall move to a safe camp on a hill. We’ll have to travel through thick forests. It is going to be a tough journey. So you should spend a few days regaining your strength, yes?”

The youth took out two tablets from his pocket, and offered them to him. “You should take these,” he said, holding them out to him. He could make out that they were vitamin tablets. He really had no need for vitamin tablets for his health. But the tablets conveyed another message, too. Was it boy’s sincerity? A sort of fellow feeling? Another reminder of the changed relationship? He wanted to say something, but the boy went out to the verandah without waiting for a reply. He never waited for replies. It was as though he needed only an intangible kind of communication. As the boy left the room, he noticed that the bag was once again slung across his back.

“I am just outside,” the boy shouted from the verandah. He knew that he would not remain just outside.

The words had been in a kind of curfew jargon: I have a certain duty. I shall discharge that duty, but I also trust you. Do not betray that trust and escape. These words of mine have merely reminded you of that trust. My duty is closely linked with your cooperation.

I am just outside. What astonishing power the words held! Even amid the unrestrained opportunities to escape, these words held him prisoner. But had the words had the same kind of meaning in the early days of his imprisonment? No, but they had aroused simultaneously feelings of fear, indignation, helplessness and insecurity.

He could hear footsteps on the verandah outside. A middle-aged man entered the room. He guessed without anyone having to tell him that he was the host. A small girl followed, carrying a bell-metal plate full of rice. The aroma of cooked chicken assailed his nostrils. The gaonburha was carrying a ghoti of water. He picked up a stiff square mat of woven bamboo strips lying in a corner of the room and put it carefully on the floor. He then placed the ghoti beside it. The little girl put the plate of rice in front of the bamboo sheet. With great politeness the gaonburha invited him to have his meal before he went out to return at once with a fresh gamosa. He placed it on one edge of the mat.

“We have little to offer you. Please partake of whatever simple food there is. We got to know of your coming very late. It is my good fortune that a great leader like you is staying in my house.”

From the respectful word of the village chief, it was clear that this was how he had been introduced in the village. The gaonburha turned up the wick of the lantern a trifle and went out, asking his guest to leave the plate outside when he had finished eating.

He was famished. And though they had served only parboiled rice, it tasted quite delicious with the chicken curry. He washed his hand over the plate itself, opened the door and walked out with it. There were no guards around. Nor was there any arrangement for locking the door from outside. He put the plate in the corner of the verandah and shut the door on entering his room.

He then sat on the bed and took out his notebook from the bag he carried. For the last three months or so, he had been keeping a diary of his captivity, when he had expressed a desire to maintain a diary, the boy had got him the notebook. Thus, out of his seven months of captivity, he had kept a daily record of his experiences of the last three months. He had also written whatever he could about the earlier period from memory.

But with the door shut, the feeling of captivity overcame him. It was as though he had voluntarily made himself a prisoner by shutting the door as if this voluntary imprisonment was a natural state for him. He had not felt this way as long as the door had been open. The subdued hum of conversation from the other house had reached him and that had seemed to forge some kind of a link with the outside world. Now that link seemed to have snapped. The room was desolate, and complete silence prevailed. It was closed from all sides. He was a prisoner. But this only gave him a strange sense of relief.

The boy who had said, I am just outside, had gone away, leaving the heavy burden of captivity on him. As long as the door was open, he was afraid that his mind might actually incite his feet: There is an open sky outside, there is freedom outside, go there. What if his feet repudiated the bondage of that unseen trust? But by shutting the door, he had accepted his captivity, and the authority of the words, I am just outside. And, wonder of wonders, he felt relieved!

He flipped the pages of his notebook to record his experiences of the day. But before starting to write, he read once again what he had written earlier. Reading the old entries everyday had become a habit with him. This was how he wanted to preserve indelibly the memory of every single day.

n the first day of the diary, he had written down his experience of the first day. That day they had dragged him into a house and locked it. “We are just outside. Do not attempt to escape.” How harsh and terrifying those words had been! They had snatched him from his familiar surroundings and plunged him into another world. And that moment when a car had suddenly stopped in front his… Four gun-totting boys had dragged him out and pushed him onto the rear seat of the other car…. And then the car

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raced away. What a terrible moment it had been! He had felt for the first time how cruel the crisis for survival could be in a world devoid of causality.

f course later on he had begun to realize that there was a total contradiction between the boy's logic of causality in the world and his own logic of it.

He had heard various words appear in their speech that he had himself read or used. No, not the tribal words. Those he had not been able to understand, and they had remained as gestures for him, gestures that aroused fear. But there were some Assamese and English words – mainly from books – that they used: Nation, state revolution, imperial power, colonialism, ethnic awareness, government, people, independence, rights.

These words had completely different nuances in their world. Even the word security had a different meaning for them, because their law was of their own making. They did not regard as a state what he had so long recognized as one. They had created their own. His was but an imperialist power in their eyes. He had thought he was a citizen of an independent country, but they had maintained that he was a slave of this imperialist force. The law that he had regarded as haven of security, they saw as state terrorism. He had regarded his abduction by them an act of terrorism; they regarded this as their national duty. The government that he had thought was giving him social and political security, was, to them an illegitimate government, a dam of bare sand put up at the mouth of a river which the turbulent deluge of revolution would sweep away. He had read about several revolution in human history, but somehow he felt that these boys were pointing revolution at him through the muzzle of a gun.

They had, of course, assured him that he was no more than a token. Their opposition was to the repressive and imperialist state machinery, they had said. He had been taken hostage because he was a symbol of that machinery, which gave a lot of importance to symbols like him. They said that once this illusion of security was removed, the regime which imposed its authority on the strength of such security, would be panic-stricken.

They had some demands of that machinery. (Some day they would overthrow that regime, but revolution would take time to gather strength. So that they had to extract some of their demands in such ways even from an illegitimate government). And the state was sure to concede their demands, because the imperialist forces had a vested interest in securing his release. If he were to die at their hands, the state would lose face.

It was not as though they had presented such arguments in precisely this fashion. But this was what he had been able to glean from their conversation. He had the impression that the thought processes of the world he lived in were controlled by a semantic field – an electromagnetic field that held a positive charge, for him and for others who thought like him. These boys too had found a positive electromagnetic field around the semantic world of their making. There was no way at all for the two fields to get close to each other. Whenever these two positive electromagnetic fields approached each other, there was conflict. Even through his bureaucratic perceptions – he was a senior government officer, after all – he could vaguely discern the strong influence of

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economic order over both the fields, and this had somehow become merged with politics.

He was afraid. He saw no means of escape from the yawning gap, the emptiness, between their world and his and the way this emptiness surrounded him. The meaning of their words and their logic were indecipherable for a long time, like obscure riddles.

They had never tortured him physically. Even though their speech was blunt and rough, he could not say that they had ever shown him disrespect. They had, from time to time, even made it possible to write letters to his family. But since the world of their ideas often clashed with his, he had been unable to trust them. He had feared that at any moment bullets would zip out of their rifles and riddle his chest.

But his mental tension was far more intense than his fear of physical injury. True, there was no end to his physical suffering. They had to change their hideout everyday. This had meant having to walk through fields, ford through chest-deep waters, trudge through forests, and wade through swamps by night. He could not feel settled anywhere. He would not have cared for this physical strain if could only have trusted them.

At night, they would put him in a room and keep watch outside. They would let him know of their presence by working the bolts of their rifles, by walking up and down or coughing occasionally. But even before they did any of this, they would drive a veritable shaft into his being with just a few words: We are outside. Don’t try to escape. It was as though each word carried the burden of disrespect, ridicule and cruelty. It was as though each word had sought to expose not just his own helplessness but that also of the bureaucratic set-up. It was as if each word had assailed him had become a synonym of terror.

He had not quite understood how a bureaucrat could be symbol of state. And yet, they assumed that by taking him as a prisoner, they had unleashed some invincible weapon against the state. They had somehow felt that this act of theirs had caused the bugles of revolution to sound more stridently. He had been convinced that these boys were being controlled by a monumental illusion, that just as he had failed to fathom the outcome of this illusion, they too had no inkling of where all this would lead them.

In fact he had not been quite sure whether his reasoning was right or wrong. But his mistrust of the boys had gone. There had also been a simple reason for this. Almost every week, they who kept watch on him had been changed. Before he got to know one group, there would be another.

Nor did he get to talk to the boys who guarded him. He got to speak only when a few of their leaders dropped by. The impassive faces of his guards never let him guess what was on their minds, and he was thus never able to trust them. And just as they had taken him to be a symbol of the state machinery, he too had regarded each one of them as a minor symbol of terrorism.

But four months ago, everything had changed. It was as though the change had begun with this boy assuming charge. It seemed as if, amid their respective positively charged magnetic fields, they had begun to discover points of attraction that allowed them to touch each other's psyche.

He did not know whether the boy belonged to the higher echelons of leadership. But he could make out that he was no ordinary bodyguard, because in most matters he took independent decisions without having to wait for orders from his superiors. The boy's English had led him to surmise that he was well educated. And even though he was a tribal boy, he spoke Assamese fluently. Mostly they talked about domestic matters. True, they did discuss ideology at times, and the boy's conversation revealed his deep convictions about revolution, but the boy always listened attentively to his opinions.

n the day this boy assumed charge, he had adopted a measure that made him feel as though the very nature of his captivity had undergone a change. Till then it had been their practice to lock the door after he was put inside his room. When the guards were near him, they would keep their firearms pointed at him. But when this boy first came to meet him, he had not carried a weapon. He had not even brought other guards with him. He had made solicitous enquiries about his well-being and brought him tidings of his family. When he had left the room the boy had gently shut the door and said, "Please bolt the door from inside. I am just outside. Don't be afraid." The words, Don't be afraid, had set up a strange reaction in his mind, and the emptiness and the distance that he had felt all along vanished in a flash. The phrases, "Don't try to escape," and "Don't be afraid" reflected two different attitudes.

And yet, the situation remained the same. As before, they had changed his hideouts frequently, moving with him from one village to another. In the process, they had got bitten by mosquitoes and wasps. There had been no question of resting for long in any one place, because the boy's organization had impressed upon him the importance of exercising the utmost caution.

What had changed was the mental equation. He was still the prisoner, and the boy his guard. But, despite the great difference in age, they had become companions. The boy had never behaved like his captor. True, he carried a gun inside his bag, but it was as if it had metamorphosed from a symbol of terror to a symbol of security. And when they roamed through the villages and hills, sometimes he had become the boy's mentor, and the boy his disciple. Now and then the boy would mention the name of a famous writer. And at such times his extensive study of books was of great help. It was as though he felt happy to be able to talk about that writer's personality, his achievements, a particular facet of some book. And the boy would listen to every word like an attentive pupil. But whenever the topic of conversation shifted to nature, rural life or the care of animals, it was the boy who became the teacher and he the pupil. He had no first-hand knowledge of the relationship between the man and nature. This life of imprisonment had helped him in the most unexpected way to acquire knowledge of life in the open.

n one occasion, he had fallen seriously ill after reaching a village. With high fever racking his body, he had lost consciousness at times. But even in his semi-conscious state, he was aware that the boy had secretly brought a doctor from a distant town.

Whenever he had regained consciousness in the course of his raging fever, he had found the boy sitting near the head of his bed, anxiety writ large on his face. When he recovered, he learnt from his host that the boy had not left him alone even for a moment. He had nursed him with utmost sincerity and concern, giving him his medicines, boiling water for him, sponging him, putting cold compresses on his brow and even cleaning up his faeces. And yet, when he recovered, there had been no show of emotion. The boy had just said, "We did not inform your family. They would have been worried. I hope you don't mind."

He had felt very grateful to him for his thoughtfulness.

Even when he had recovered, it had been necessary for them to remain in the same village for quite a few days – until he regained his strength. During this period the two of them talked about diverse subjects. It was then that he had expressed the desire to maintain a diary. He had thought that the boy will not be willing to let him keep a daily record of his captivity. But he had readily agreed and had even got him a notebook the next day. Every time he made an entry in his diary, he would show it to the boy. The boy could see his captive's inner world in this. After his illness, the sense of uncertainty gnawing at his mind had increased. His conscious self had failed to perceive this but the boy would read out the diary entry and show him how his subconscious had found expressions through the words there.

As soon as he had regained his strength, it had become imperative for them once again to keep changing hideouts. At times he had become restless at the very thought of how uncertain his release was. And this was reflected in his diary.

It was after reading some such entries that the boy had said one day, "You are impatient for your release, aren't you? But your government is not thinking of you at all. We have put forth some conditions. The moment they agree to them, we can release you."

He had asked the boy, "And what if they don't accept your conditions?"

The boy had remained nonplussed for a while, and then he had replied with a smile, "In that case you can be one of us and remain with us. Would you really dislike that?"

Finally he had given up thinking about his release. He had begun to accept captivity as a natural state of life. It was during those days that the boy had relaxed even the security arrangements. There were nights when after he had said, "I am just outside," he would abandon his vigil. He would leave the bag containing the weapon lying near his prisoner. It seemed as though the boy was giving him innumerable opportunities to escape, yet on the other hand, it was as though he was trussing him up with invisible bonds of trust.

It was during that period that he had begun to get news of police military troops searching high and low for him. But somehow he had ceased to regard such news as happy tidings. Whenever he got the news of army approaching, he too would become anxious. He too would feel impatient to get to some "safe" place with the boy. Of

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course, a part of his conscious mind was aware that his behaviour would be regarded by his society as irrational. Yet, he had begun to think of his distance from them and the boy's weapon as the assurance of safety.

Even today, it was news of approaching troops that had made them flee their earlier hideout and take shelter in this village. Leaving him in his room, the boy had gone elsewhere to sleep – perhaps in the main house of the gaonburha – while he had voluntarily acknowledged his captivity by bolting the door from inside.

As on other days, he recorded the day's experience in his notebook. He then had the two tablets the boy had given him, with a gulp of water, and stretched out on the bed. The security of the bed took him in its embrace.

He woke with the first chirping of the birds. He undid the bolt on his door and came out to the verandah. It was as if the gaonburha had been waiting for him. He promptly fetched a round bamboo stool, put it on the verandah with great courtesy and requested him to sit down. The little girl who had brought him his supper last night, brought him a bowl of milkless tea along with a bit of jaggery. It seemed as though the rest of the family were maintaining a respectful distance from the "leader". He relished the milk even though it was without milk.

Just then, the two boys, who had escorted him the previous day, arrived on a bicycle. When the boys heard their voices, he came out of the main house.

"It is no longer safe to stay even in this village," the two boys told him. A few kilometers down the road they had come across some soldiers. The soldiers had stopped and searched them and had asked them if any stranger had come that way. The boys had, of course, sent them off to a wild-goose chase to a distant village.

When the boy had heard them out, he said, "We must move to the camp today. Villages are no longer safe."

He had long wanted to ask a question, but a certain diffidence had prevented him till now. Now the question shot out of him, unbidden, "if the soldiers surround this house now and attempt to rescue me, what will you fellows do?"

The boy had not been prepared for the sudden question. He just stared at him, not answering him at once. Then he retorted, "What will you do?"

Unprepared for this counter question, he looked quite non-plussed. Then, the boy came out with an unequivocal reply, "If such a situation does arise, I would have no option but to sentence you to death."

The words so stunned him, he just kept gazing at the boy. Was this the same boy who had nursed him with untiring devotion?

As if he could fathom his thoughts, the boy said, "You are not our enemy. But don't misunderstand me. The state seeks legitimacy for itself by promising to provide security to its citizens. We shall have to prove that your government is not capable of doing

this. If you die, the cause of your death would thus be neither me nor my organization. Your death would have been caused by your government. If I wish to keep the revolution alive, then, it would be my duty to give you the death sentence."

Strange logic indeed! He was quite sure that no legal system in the entire world would regard such logic to be just. But in the world this boy inhabited, such logic had acquired legitimacy. Even he began to feel that there was no other path before the boy. And the jolt that his mind had received on being told of the death sentence seemed to fade away. He felt a calmness within him. It was as though he had transcended his own logical orbit to enter the world of the boy's logic.

It was decided that they would set out for the camp that very afternoon. Meanwhile, the boy called a few others from the village and sent them out to get information about how safe their route was. By lunchtime one of them returned with bad news. Troops had already located the camp on the hill that morning and had destroyed it.

So there was no question of moving to the camp. The village was no longer as safe as it had been, but they would have to spend the night there and look for a safe hideout the next morning.

The boy set about tightening the security measures for the night. Several new faces were seen just before dusk. He also hint of weapons in their bags. His bodyguard gave the boys several instructions and sent them off to guard all the entry points to village. The boy even sent the gaonburha and his family to other homes in the village for the night.

"We are taking special measures for tonight," the boy told him. "In the interest of your safety, I'll have to spend the night in your room. Several of our liberation force boys will remain on guard all around the house. If we can get through the night safely, we'll move to another place at the crack of dawn."

They all had their meal before dusk. Soon the village was engulfed in darkness. The lantern dimly lit the room. An aura of stillness and silence hung heavy all around. The boy was not even talking today. He stood beside the door with fine-honed alertness, the deadly weapon fully exposed. He sat silently on the bed.

The boy turned to him and said, "Go to sleep. I am awake." But he remained sitting as before. How could he possibly fall asleep, even if he wanted to?

Perhaps he had just dozed off. He woke up with a start when he heard one of the guards barge in. He said something to the boy and ran out again, shutting the door behind him. Somewhere far away or maybe not so far away – he could not quite make out – something like a fire cracker went off.

"The enemy has surrounded us on sides," said the boy. The eyes locked momentarily. The boy stared at him, without even a flicker of his eyelids. Then, he signaled him to get off the bed.

There were a few more sounds outside. This time he was certain that they were of guns.

He got off the bed and stood before the boy.

The boy was pointing the gun at his chest. He felt as if the final moment of his captivity had arrived. Were the final moments always as long as this?

Several rounds of firing were heard now.

Was this death? Then why had he not lost consciousness?

And then everything happened all at once. Just as the boy was about to lay down his weapon, countless bullets had riddled the boy's body. He saw blood gushing out of his mouth. His gun slipped from his hands, and the boy's body fell heavily to the floor.

The ultimate moment of his captivity had not turned into his moment of death, because the boy had not fired his gun.

Several soldiers rushed into the room. One of them extended his hand to him and said, "I am captain Batra. Thank god, you are safe!" He pulled out his walkie-talkie. It crackled briefly, before the officer sent his message: Operation successful. Target safe. ne terrorist killed.

Terrorist! The word seemed to dash against the magnetic field of his brain and explode. Two agonized words escaped his lips – Oh, no! – as he sank to the floor next to the boy's lifeless body. He put his hand on the boy's brow and gazed steadfastly into his captor's unseeing eyes.

Captain Batra did not stop him. He stood there. His fingers touching his cap in ritual respect.

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The Invitation

Arupa Patangia Kalita

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Just below the mango tree (the one that grows those small delicious mangoes) was the figure of a woman carying a small basket and picking something, probably some leafy vegetables. As I drew near, she turned to look at me : "What are you doing here Baidew?" In the beginning I did feel a bit awkward being addressed a Baidew by such an elderly woman. But time makes everything easier and there was also some sort of respectability in that word. I went near her and asked : "What are you doing? Trying to pick some edible ferns?" There was a kind of urgency in what she was doing. "With all the boys and girls scouring about the place will anything remain here?" Her basket contained just a little of these ferns. Our kitchen garden could boast of a variety of these ferns and I suggested to her : "You can pick some from our garden." She did not move. "Come, come, we can hardly finish all that, and once these ferns and vegetables grow old they can hardly be eaten. We are soon going to clear the area, mix cow-dung with the soil and sow some new seeds."

She walked hesitantly towards our house and drank, rather reluctantly, the cup of tea that I had offered. Just before leaving she looked at me : "Baidew will you pay us a visit sometimes?" "I will try to make it some evening." She appeared startled : "You will come just like that? But where will I make you sit? What will I offer you? No, no, you must come when I invite you" She smiled and left soon after. When she lifted her mekhela to walk over the bamboo fence, there was barely any difference between the dried bamboo poles and her shrivelled ankles.

She lived just across the fence, and was known in the neighbourhood as Mrs Sarma. She often reminded one of a dark moonless night – her dark complexion, her broad lips that became broader when she smiled, her teeth just about to fall off and her wavy hair with touches of grey. But there was an appeal in her eyes. When one looked at her face endearingly, her eyes would shine like the lone star in the dark moonless night. Her wide eyes bore some pain, almost like that of a frightened deer.

Everything about Sarma's house reeked of poverty – the cracks in the roof, the compound without the fence, the toilet with a sack used in place of a door, and the slippery and muddy area surrounding the well. Mr Sarma was a handsome man and his children had inherited his handsome looks. Her sons were full of fads and fancies, but none of them had managed to cross the school level. I often saw her fair daughter fluttering her eyelids and talking to a long-haired young man. People say that there was a time when Mr Sarma had been the owner of a big shop at the heart of the town, but vices like drinking and gambling led to its closure. Though apparently serious his nature was such that, while talking to young ladies he could never remain still. From what I have gathered Mrs Sarma had belonged to a well-to-do family in Jorhat. Her common looks had driven away many an eligible young man, and it was feared that she would stand in the way of her younger siblings. Soon her father found Sarma for his daughter. Sarma was eligible to become the son-in-law of the affluent Chakravarty family from two points – his handsome looks and the sacred thread on his body. His father-in-law had set up the business for him. The sons finished off whatever was left of it. Now all that remained was the decaying house and the half katha of land, and in this small patch of land Sarma's wife grew varieties of flowers – chrysanthemums, gardenias and

marigolds. The courtyard was swept clean and an earthen lamp was lighted before the tulsi plant every evening.

But the fragrance of the flowers in her garden could hardly linger in the presence of the smell of liquor and meat. Her feeble rendering of prayers before Goddess Lakshmi could barely be heard over the commotion in the house, and there were times when even the lamps were crushed under the pressure of heavy boots. It was during such times that the distraught woman would sit under that mango tree till the late hours of the night braving the snakes and frogs. My heart would often skip a beat when the commotion in their house went out of control. At such moments the woman would inevitably sit near the fence and weep her heart out. Very often I would call her over and offer a cup of tea. However I could never persuade her to take a meal at my place. When the noise subsided she would always part with the words : "Please come over when I invite you to our place." I would readily agree : "Yes, yes, why not?"

* * *

From what I could gather from my place the rooms in Mrs Sarma's house were mostly lying vacant. Our neighbours would often speak of the kind of dowry, one loaded truck that is, that Mrs Sarma had brought along with her and how husband and sons had finished off everything. There was a sarai made of brass with intricate designs that would almost reach the height of a man's waist. She would often polish it and place it under the sun. The way she would guard it with a stick, to keep away the crows, it was as if she was trying to preserve not the sarai but her lost maidenhood.

ne night at about ten O'clock when the sound of her weeping reached my ears, I went out and flashed my torch at the area just below the mango tree. There stood Mrs Sarma clutching the shining sarai close to her bosom. At a little distance away stood Sarma with unsteady feet, grumbling to himself : "Look at the vanity of this owlish woman! Ha! Showing off her father's property? All these days has anyone come to have a look at your dark face?" He was clearly drunk and kept slurring his words, and it was only when he disappeared from sight did the woman stand up and turn to me : "I have lost everything and now only the sarai remains. I have three sons and a daughter and someday when there is a puja in the household the offerings will be made on this sarai. I will never part with this." The fragile woman somehow lifted the sarai up to take it back home. When I showed her the way with the help of my torch, her back quivered again and again. I did not have to look at her face to know that she was weeping.

ne morning, I opened the door and there was Mrs Sarma crouching on the doorsteps. I called out: "Mrs Sarma!" The tone of my voice must have startled her, and like a mother sheltering her babies she did something under her clothes. Just a glance was enough to tell me that it was the sarai again. I looked around for the man with the unsteady feet but did not find him. I offered her a stool to sit on, and went out to the gate and there stood a lungi clad, fair and clean-cut young man. As soon as I opened the gate he walked in to look for his mother. The woman covered the sarai and sat still. I went forward and asked him "What happened?" He smiled meekly at me and replied: "The Sub Deputy Collector's wife is very fond of me and has offered to give me a job through her husband. Everything is settled, only ..." He paused. The whole

neighbourhood knew that Sarma's eldest son used to sell lottery tickets and had been once arrested by the police. There was a rumour that the women residing in the government quarters were getting terribly hooked to the game of lottery. The boy's association with the Sub Deputy Collector's wife was also not unknown. The young man now came near his mother: "Come on, give this sarai to me. You know how fond Baidew is of these old things. Once the job is mine I will buy you another one. No, no, why will she give it to me?" He looked at her resentfully : "Now say, you have four sons and a ..." The handsome face now assumed a monstrous look. The woman barked at him: "I have already said no and now don't go on." The young man walked out in a huff.

Mrs Sarma had a cup of tea with me: "Baidew, my daughter had attained puberty last year and I had to perform the puja myself. I had planned to invite some women for naam prasanga, but now a year has passed ..." Her voice was choked: "The annual shraddha ceremony of my parents fall on the same full moon day and I had planned to perform the Satyanarayan Puja on that day itself. The other day I dreamt that God had emerged from my puja room and was chasing me around with an earthen lamp on His hand. I am a terrible sinner. I have been thinking of performing all these pujas on the same day."

I tried to change the topic of conversation: "I presume pujas were frequently performed at your father's place." Her face beamed with a shy smile: "My father was a ritualist and every week at least two or three pujas were performed at our place. My sisters were always busy in their studies, and once my mother became too weak to work the entire responsibility fell on me. Everyone appreciated the way I arranged the prasad and my father could make out when I did not do it."

She put down her cup of tea and rose to go: "You know, I often think of inviting our neighbours for a naam prasanga, cook some kheer and light some earthen lamps of ghee. All these would enable me to unburden myself. Mother Goddess must be angry with me. No wonder ..." She wrapped the sarai with her shawl: "Why should I give this to them? Someday ..." Her feeble voice bore signs of weeping.

* * *

One night, I heard Sarma roaring and that too in his senses: "Now that he had moved in with her, he is as good as dead. If he comes back I'll chop him into two." The other sons echoed their father's sentiments: "How could he have gone to that deserted woman? We will move out of here if he is allowed to enter this house." In the midst of all the commotion there was in the air the sound of somebody weeping. Next day, the word was out that Sarma's eldest son had moved in with the deserted wife of the grocer. Both of them were supposed to have got married in the temple of Kamakhya. People had even seen them going to the cinema together. That evening I went out with the intention of meeting Sarma's wife, and there she was sitting mournfully on the doorsteps. On seeing me she came forward: "Baidew, are you going somewhere? I am sure you must have already heard about us ..." She went on to relate everything in details, but not even once did she call me in. My legs ached with all the standing. From

inside the house came the voice of the sozzled man: "Let him come ... I will show him." The woman wilted in shame. I softly suggested to her: "Now that it has already happened, it would be best to formally bring her in." Her face visibly brightened: "Even I was thinking of that. We could at least have a naam prasanga of the women ... But none of them would hear of it and my son too doesn't intend to come back." Her voice was choked. By now I could hardly stand and Mrs Sarma too knew it, but, the voice from inside again reached our ears: "It is all because of this woman ... pampering her son ... thinks she is a royal lady." She lowered her head in shame and could say no more. When I parted from her there was a look of guilt in her eyes: "You had to return from here ..." I rushed back home and when I turned to look at her, she was again sitting on her doorsteps. And through the worn-out aanchal I could see her quivering back – a familiar sight by now.

* * *

I had seen the second son of Mrs Sarma only a couple of times, as the brawny, young man was hardly ever home. People had various opinions about him. According to some he was the member of a terrorist gang, and that he also had some shady dealings. There were others who were of the opinion that he was a police informer and was responsible for many young men being apprehended by the police and the army. Some also believed that he dealt in arms as well as drugs. I would often see him on his motorbike, and like his siblings always geared in trendy clothes. But for the last couple of days he has been seen at home. After a few days a red Maruti car was seen parked outside their house. With time more and more new shiny cars carrying their young owners were also noticed. The sound of music blared from their house followed by loud, vulgar noises. The courtyard swept clean by the lady became a godown for logs of timber. Every night truckloads of timber would be loaded and unloaded, and though in the beginning it did disturb our sleep later we grew used to the noise. The house too witnessed many changes – A TV antema was seen on the roof and two concrete rooms were also added to the existing house. The outfits of Sarma's daughter was the talk of the neighbourhood, and instead of the long-haired young man she was now seen enjoying rides in the cars, scooters and motorcycles of those young men.

Earlier Mrs Sarma sat under the mango tree only after one of those family quarrels, but now she passed most of her time here with crotchet hooks or knitting needles in her hands. Her health too was visibly declining. One day when she was crocheting a cover for the sarai under the shade of the mango tree I went near her. Nowadays she would pant after uttering a few words. I wanted to catch a glimpse of her smile: "What about some celebration now that you have a new car, a new television and have also renovated your house?" She folded her work: "Even I have been thinking of offering the puja to lighten my burden." I invited her over for a cup of tea. Nowadays there was no need to walk over the fence as a small opening had been formed on the bamboo fence itself. She drank two glasses of water and placed her hand across her chest. I asked her: "Aren't you feeling well ?" "No, at times my chest feels very heavy and I find it difficult to breathe." When I inquired if she had been to the doctor there was only silence.

She looked better after she had the cup of tea. She looked at me meaningfully: "Baidew, yesterday in the early hours of the morning I dreamt that the earthen lamp of my puja room was dancing around the courtyard and suddenly the logs of timber caught fire. Do you know who did I see in the midst of the fire with hands pointed towards heaven?" Her voice trembled. "Who?" "My uncle. There was fire all around him, and he was desperately calling my father. My uncle too dealt in timber, and do you know how he died?" There was a feverish glow in her eyes now. "How?" "He was sitting on the front seat of the truck that was carrying timber when the logs fell on top of him. His body was crushed to a pulp ..." By now she was panting.

"Please, do not speak for a while." Mrs Sarma drank her second cup of tea without any protest. "You know Baidew, my father would often say that even trees have life, and my uncle died of its curse. Nowadays I often get the apparition of the blood-soaked body of my uncle (as if trampled by an elephant) who was crushed under the logs, lying over the logs in our courtyard." Mrs Sarma was all the time looking at my eyes. "You should perform the puja that you always wanted to as early as possible." I knew that the idea would at least bring her some peace. Her face visibly brightened : "You are right. I will call the priest and fix up a date for the puja. I will let you know the day before. As I am not keeping well these days you have to come and help me." She rose to leave. "You just have to inform me. If necessary I will go and stay the night before." I laughed loudly and so did she.

* * *

One evening, new shiny cars were seen parked in front of Sarma's house one after another. And even before the dusk had set in the deafening sound of Western music rocked the whole neighbourhood. This was soon followed by the sound of gunfire. The unnerved people of the locality preferred to confine themselves to the closed doors of their houses. The piercing screams of the young men were akin to the howling of dogs and jackals. Their ear-splitting laughter was at least able to reassure the neighbourers that there was no dead body lying. The people were by now accustomed to the noisy scenes in Sarma's house, but that day things went beyond the limits of toleration. When I opened the rear door of my house I was forced to shut my ears.

My instincts had been right – there stood the shivering figure of Mrs Sarma wrapped from head to toe. "Please come in or you'll catch a cold sitting out there." She came in without any protest, and finished the cup of tea along with the two biscuits and a roti (prepared for our evening meal) that I had offered her. She drank a full glass of water before going off to sleep on the bed I made for her. Through the window came the sound of the wringing of chickens' necks. Mrs Sarma never allowed the hens and cocks in her courtyard lest they defile her tulsi plant. But today a bright light was shining in that very place, and from our verandah one could clearly see the heap of colourful wings of the chickens killed. When I looked at her she was already asleep.

In the morning Sarma came to take her back home. From a distance he looked like a young man in his pair of blue jeans and a matching pullover. He just gave her a look and turned to me: "I don't know what we are going to do with this difficult woman.

Yesterday even on such a sacred occasion she disappeared from her home." The woman with her lowered eyes continued to sit on our doorsteps. She walked back home with shaky feet only after the departure of her husband. For the first time she parted from me without a word. The news did not take long to reach us that her second son had brought a woman home the night before. The affair had been going on for sometime and when the situation took such a scandalous turn he had to bring her to the fold. It was rumoured that her daughter's state too was such that she could not come out in the open.

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Mrs Sarma was not to be seen anywhere – neither on the verandah nor under the mango tree. As there was no sign of her daughter there was no one I could ask. It was from our neighbour Mrs Baruah did I come to know that the young man did not want to shoulder the responsibility of Sarma's daughter, and that the boy's mother had called Mrs Sarma 'a whore's mother' under her very roof. It was only at gunpoint did he finally marry her. And since her daughter's departure Mrs Sarma had been confined to bed due to ill health.

It was on that very day did I pass the mango tree and stepped into her house. I had to lift my mekhela to walk over the garbage and scattered logs. There was no one around. The stench was unbearable. Mrs Sarma was sitting on a bed and her face resembled that of a corpse. She called out to me: "Baidew, can you get me some holy water from the priest?" Suddenly there was a wild look in her eyes: "Look, look my earthen lamp is dancing about the place ... soon everything is going to burn ... fire ... fire ..." A shiver ran down my body when I tried to touch her – it was like a skeleton's hand. She turned towards the wall and muttering to herself soon fell asleep. It was as if she was trying to cast off something that was stuck to her palm. I watched her trembling hand for sometime and made a silent departure. I had been away for sometime and on my return I learnt about her death. It did not surprise me as I had already bade farewell to her silently in that dark and dingy room itself. Sarma came and invited me rather graciously to the Shraddha ceremony.

I went to their place rather unwillingly on the day of the Shraddha. The courtyard had been cleared of all the garbage, logs and empty bottles. Mrs Sarma's eldest son and daughter-in-law, daughter and son-in-law had all come over for the occasion. Her other son and his wife fittingly played the role of the host and hostess. Her relatives like her sister and brother-in-law, brother and sister-in-law too made their appearance. Looking at the various arrangements one could feel that every member of the family had spent lavishly. A woman emerged from the house bending under the weight of the sarai that she was carrying – that sarai with the intricate designs on it. Someone gravely arranged an offering for God on it. A handsome gentleman placed an old photograph (now newly framed) of Mrs Sarma against the sarai and lit an earthen lamp of ghee before it. Her eyes resembling the shiny stars on a dark moonless night now seemed to stare from the photograph. It seemed as if she would walk out of the photograph to welcome me: "Baidew, so you have come. Please ... please come and have a seat."

The daughter, the wife and the mother

Arupa Patangia Kalita

Every morning Gauri Pehi rose at dawn and rushed through her routine work. Getting up, she would sweep the house, the courtyard, take a hurried bath and then enter the kitchen. She would keep mumbling to herself as she fried fritters for breakfast. After everybody had finished breakfast, Gauri Pehi would start her second phase of work: chopping vegetables or cleaning fish. Sometimes she would sit for a while and rebuke somebody. At times she would cry and sometimes laugh. After everybody in the house had started with their daily chores, she would sit under the margosa tree till she got her call for lunch.

It was not always like that. When Pehi's mother was alive she hardly had any time to rest. Her mother was bed-ridden for years and bedsores covered her body. Pehi's time passed nursing her mother. Now after her death, she had these few hours for herself.

All the fifty years of her life, Pehi had spent shunting between the kitchen, the courtyard and the margosa tree. That such a day would come to her life was beyond people's imagination. The light and dark crevices of her mind were in utter confusion. There Pehi was sitting on her haunches. Today was altogether a different day for Pehi. Since morning, she had not entered the kitchen. Her breakfast was brought to her bedside, and they gave her warm water to bathe in the bathroom! Her sister-in-law made her bed and her brother came to enquire about her meals. This undue importance seemed intolerably intriguing, and confused Gauri Pehi.

Pehi was sitting on the bed. Lifting her mekhela, her hand touched the tiny white spot on her thigh. For fifty long years the spot had been in the same place – the size of a small pea. She shuddered. Pictures started racing before her mind's eyes. She was then a girl with long, lustrous black tresses. Pehi saw herself as a bride. A stout man was dragging her from the room to the courtyard, the bride pulling her sador to cover her head, her teeth gritted to regulate her sobs. The man left her sprawling on the courtyard. He roared like a lion. "They have cheated me into marrying this diseased woman." A few neighbourhood women came to watch the scene. The man tried to raise the woman's mekhela to show the cause of his anger, but the bride pulled it down with all her might. A middle-aged man strode to her and grasping her long hair shook it vigorously. "This witch – she has come to ruin my son's life!" She slowly lifted her mekhela and now the pea-like spot was clearly visible in the sun. Everybody shouted in unison, "Come on, send her away!" "Go and leave her at her father's place." "Don't let her take anything!" "Keep all the ornaments we gave her for her joron!" She cried helplessly and the man now dragged her outside the gate.

"Ma...... has she taken her bath?" Outside Pehi heard the manly voice. Her brother's wife came in. "Gauri, what are you doing? Gautam has already taken out the car, and you are still not ready!" Her younger brother's wife gave her a new pat mekhela and a sador with a border. "You need not wear that dress. Wear this." Her elder sister-in-law

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handed her an ivory box. “Ma had left your ornaments. You can take them with you.” “Pehi, wear your light gold chain. You will be going with your son, in his red Maruti. You should at least wear something on your neck.” Her niece said. She had come from her in-laws to bid farewell to Pehi.

Pehi stepped out of her room towards the well, but her sister-in-law stopped her. “I have put warm water in the bathroom. You will also find the soap.” Pehi lifted her head to say something. Before marriage she bathed in the bathroom but after her return they had stopped her from doing so and had written her off as a mad person. “Mad woman! God only knows what she would do in the bathroom.”

Pehi poured a mug of water. Then taking the fragrant, white-cake of bathing soap, she hesitated. As if the touch of water inflamed the pea-sized white mark!

Pehi again emerged as the new bride – the beautiful girl with the bright, golden-yellow complexion. Five times they had chased her away, and five times she had been sent back. The fifth time she took with her a fair, chubby baby boy. Again they sent her back, keeping the baby. She did not want to leave behind her baby. The man had a difficult time in sending her away. Locking up the baby in a room, her mother-in-law spattered filthy words at her. They tied her with a rope and put her on the back of a bullock cart. The nineteen-year-old nursing mother implored, begged and cried out her heart, but to no avail. Her plight made even the cart-driver shed tears. She made a vain effort to loosen the rope, she bled. Milk dripping from her breasts mixed with blood, showed on her sador.

Pehi came out of the bathroom. The whole neighbourhood was there, especially the womenfolk. Someone combed her partly grey hair and made her wear the new dress. Pehi sat among them like a stone statue.

They did not see her retreating to her past. Fate had indeed dealt a heavy blow on her. She yearned for her little one. When people from her husband’s place came, she sent word through them. “If he marries again will he give me back my son?”

Throughout she saw her sister-in-law bearing and rearing children. She waited and waited for years. And she became a mad woman. She started mumbling to herself, sometimes laughing, sometimes crying, sometimes shouting at others. Yet nobody came with the news of her son.

Her sisters-in-law and her niece were packing for her. Her niece was saying. “How can she go in one dress? What will a mad woman....” Pehi’s elder sister-in-law stopped short when she saw the handsome man watching them. “Ma, are you ready? Let’s go then. We have a long way to go!” Pehi stared at the young man. The sight of the chubby baby flashed before her mind’s eye. Who would say that the handsome, bespectacled man was her son?

Pehi sat still. Someone was tying her hair into a neat bun. Pehi felt as if some unknown hand was rubbing away the vermilion from the parting of her hair, taking out her bangles and dressing her in a white garb. How many years had passed by?

Pehi's luggage was loaded in her son's car. The womenfolk sat surrounding her. Romola Jethai remarked, "It's Gauri's sheer luck that she can die at her husband's place!" Now, they were talking about her son. "How handsome Gauri's son is! Like a prince. Not only that – he is also a famous doctor. Poor thing, had to grow up tortured by a step-mother."

Somebody wanted to force Pehi into the car. "No no no", she forced her way out of the car. "Mama, I wonder whether I am doing the right thing taking her away. All these years she had stayed with you, the last days of her life...?"

Pehi's sister-in-law came forward. "No....., no, its alright. She is fortunate. At least, she would die, staying with you. All these years we have kept her."

Pehi's two younger brothers were standing next to each other. A stench touched their nostrils – the smell of their mother's bed sores. The mad Gauri had nursed her. Suddenly everybody grew excited to put Pehi inside the car. Pehi wailed, she sobbed. No ..... no, she did not want to go. The picture of a bullock cart floated before her eyes. The cart-driver standing with a pair of white and black bullocks, the shrill cry of the baby, the nineteen-year-old girl tied with a rope and left in the cart. A strong hand held her pinioned to the cart, Pehi making a vain effort to set herself free. The soothing security of the margosa beckoned her. It stood like a beam of light in her otherwise dark world. She cried out shrilly, "No........ no...... no!"

The handsome young man looked at the old woman on the rear seat. He frowned. Was it a mistake? Pehi's father had bought a plot of land in her name right in the middle of Guwahati. The thought brought some sort of solace to his mind. Everything was ready. nly a thumb impression and then a house, a chamber and a nursing home in future. The car started moving.

Pehi was wailing now. In her subconscious, she heard the cry of a baby. "No no no!" The young man looked again. How would Namita put up with her! Even if she did, what will people say? It is alright, something should be done. He had already told his uncle that his mother needed treatment. He would send her to a mental asylum. Who would blame him? Yes, she should be treated!

The waiting women near the gate let out an uruli.